とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情

ある日。上条当麻が目覚めると、そこは一面広々とした異様な空間。謎の巨大兵器『オブジェクト』が飛竜と戦っていたり、ショタコンのファンタジーお姉さんが助けてくれたり、一緒に迷い込んだ美琴がビキニアーマーを着ることになったり……鎌池作品の人気キャラ&ヒロインが大集合した夢のスペシャルノベル！

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か-12-54

とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情

鎌池和馬

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鎌池和馬

道はどこかに繋がっている。そんなこんなで一〇周年です。キャラクターというのはどこから見て何を切り取るかで印象はガラリと変わっていくものですが……こうして色んなキャラをぶつけてみると、ガラリといくなあ、と自分で驚いています。

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簡単なアンケートです
簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情
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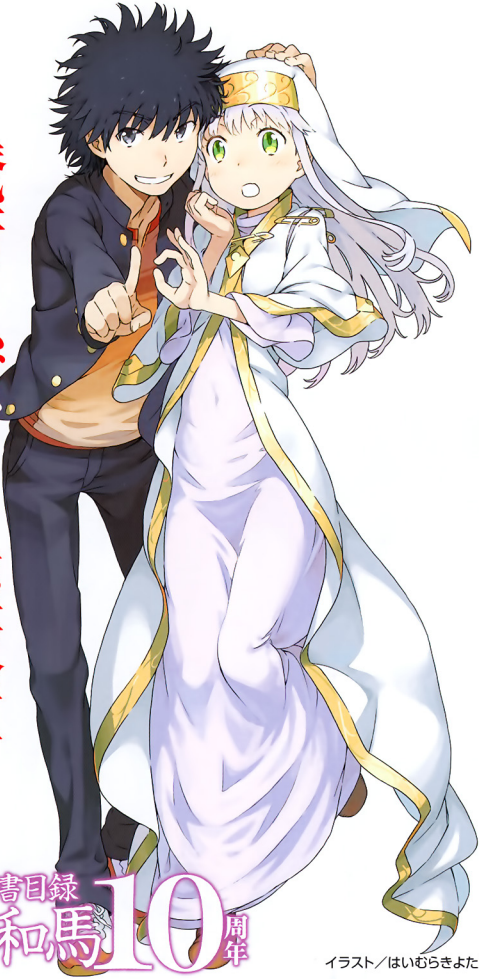
とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情

イラスト:はいむらきよたか、凪良、真早、葛西心、依河和希、烏丸渡、犬江しんすけ、朝倉亮介、たいしょう田中、原つもい、かまた

とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情

鎌池和馬



とある魔術の禁書目録 鎌池和馬10周年

イラスト／はいむらきよたか

とある魔術の禁書目録
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イラスト／凪良

特別収録 とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情

コンピレーションイラストギャラリー

イラスト／依河和希

「とうま、この格好で
また表を歩かなくちゃならないの!?」
インデックス
(From とある魔術の禁書目録)
♀装備:裸マント
イラスト／鳥丸 渡

御坂美琴
(From とある魔術の禁書目録)
♀装備:ビキニアーマー
「よおし、あいつら全員木炭にしてやる……!!」
イラスト／犬江しんすけ

座敷童
(From インテリビレッジの座敷童)
♀装備:南国式葉っぱ水着
「必要のない戦いに
巻き込まれてしまったようね。
私、根本的に働きたくない
精神の塊だっていうのに……」
イラスト／朝倉亮介

雪女
(From インテリビレッジの座敷童)
♀装備:小悪魔風ボンデージビキニ

イラスト／たいしょう田中

「転生がお望みでしたらいつでもお声掛けを」
殺人妃サツキ
(From 殺人妃とディープエンド)
♀装備:踊り子さん
イラスト／葛西 心

バニーガール可憐
(From 簡単なモニターです)
♀装備:バニースーツ
「やーだなー!!
何でもかんでも
魅惑のバニーガール可憐ちゃんのせいに
しないでくださいよう☆」
イラスト／原 つもい

ヴァルトラウテ
(From ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情)
♀装備:ドレスメーカー
「いや、そもそも我らの世界には
このような装束は存在しないため、
何が正解かは全く見えんのだが」
「それってあれでしょ、
親が買って子供に
着せるような水着でしょ!?」
イラスト／真早

CONTENTS

序章……014
第一章……036
第二章……086
第三章……180
第四章……234
終章……324
A.E.02 もはや水着回とか言っている場合ではない2.0……332

ミリンダ・ブランティーニ
(From ヘヴィーオブジェクト)

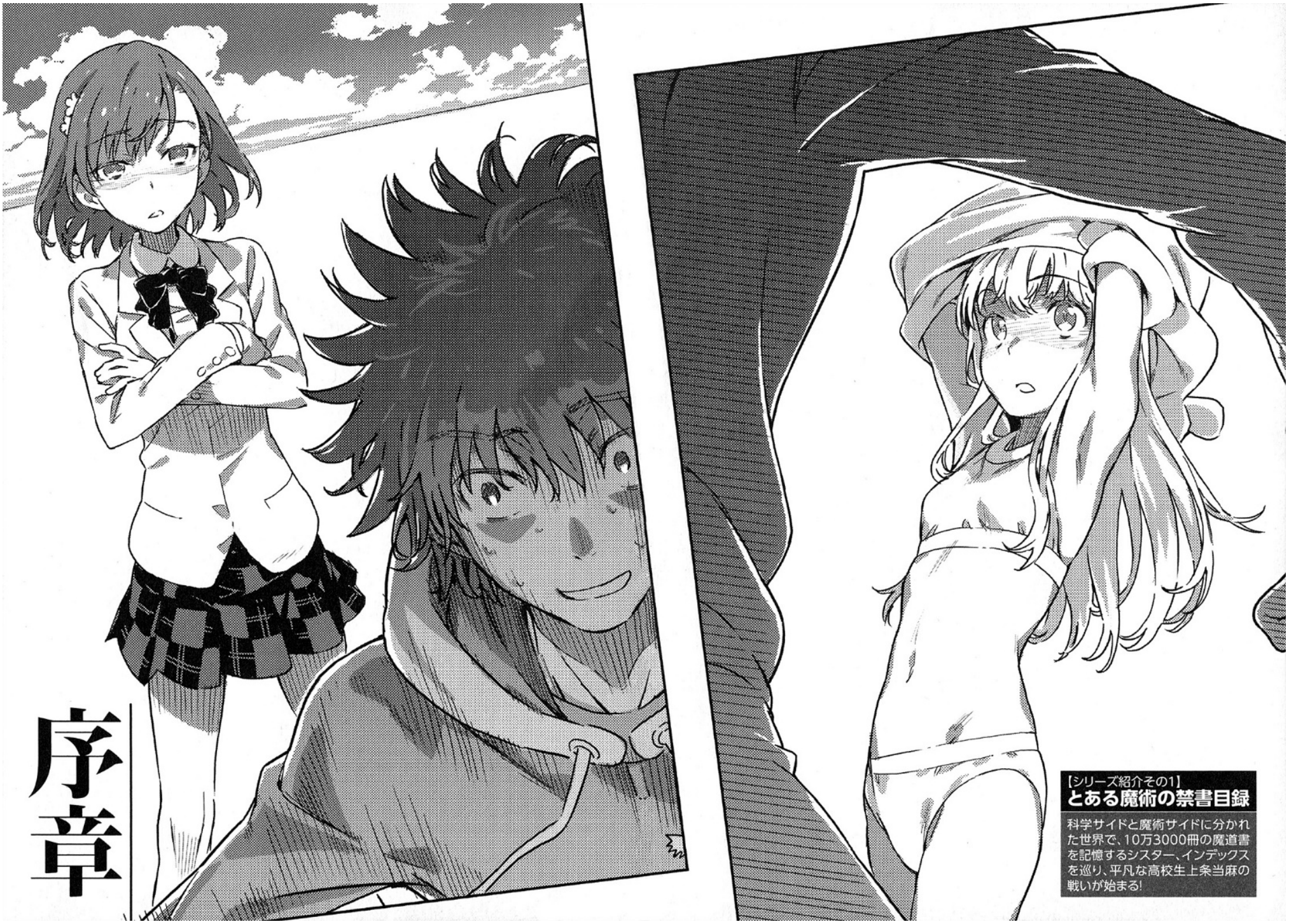
イラスト／かまた

PROLOGUE

[Series Introduction 01]

A Certain Magical Index

In a world split between a science side and a magic side, the fight over Index, a nun who has memorized 103,000 grimoires, begins for a normal high school boy named Kamijou Touma!


序章
【シリーズ紹介その1】
とある魔術の禁書目録
科学サイドと魔術サイドに分かれた世界で、10万3000冊の魔道書を記憶するシスター、インデックスを巡り、平凡な高校生上条当麻の戦いが始まる!

When Kamijou Touma thought back, he realized that day had been awful from the very beginning.

♦

For some strange reason, the high school boy named Kamijou Touma lived in a one-room student dorm with a silver-haired, green-eyed nun. He normally slept in the locked bathroom. After wiping all moisture from the bathtub, he would grab a blanket and sleep inside it, but on this day, he was visited by misfortune from the moment he woke.

To get right to the point, it went something like this.

"Ehhhhhhhhhh!? Wh-why is the toilet acting like a park fountain!?"

As soon as he opened his eyes, he was reminded in the worst possible way that Japan was a country of plentiful water.

He pulled out the tool box he rarely used, but he had no idea where to even begin. He decided to start by removing the lid of the boxy tank and peering inside.

"What even caused this? It was working just fine yesterday."

He had no clue what to do or even what it was normally supposed to look like.

He was so confused that he gave up and threw back his head to look upwards.

Even at a time like this, the blue sky was perfectly clear and refreshing.

"Hm?"

He felt about ready to destroy the world, but he realized something was not quite right.

The blue sky?

He froze in place and hesitantly checked on his surroundings.

He found he was no longer in his dorm bathroom. Above, he saw the vast blue sky. Below, he saw a polished wood floor like that of a gym. The concept of walls did not apply here. He could see to the horizon for the full 180 degrees ahead of him. When he turned around, he finally saw what looked like neatly shaped mountains. He was not sure whether to call them triangles, rice balls, or pyramids. They were the only visible objects in this "world", but even they were two or three kilometers away.

The scenery was so simplistic that he was filled with an overwhelming sense of scale that left normal reality behind. A gentle breeze carried only the scent of the ocean. That scent alone allowed Kamijou to keep his mind from floating away.

Where was he?

How had he ended up here?

When had he wandered into this strange world?

He threw aside all those legitimate questions and let out a shout.

“Waaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiitttttttttt!!!??? I can’t just leave the toilet like that!! Take me back!! If it floods the floor below, they’ll be really mad!! If it causes enough of a scene, it might even end up on the news sites!!”

He needed to hurry.

Every second mattered.

He did not know what kind of secrets this place held, but he had to hurry back to his dorm. He had to do whatever it took to ensure that.

(There are a few different problems. For example, the area I have to search is extremely large and yet there are almost no landmarks. I can search around if I want, but it won’t be easy getting back here or figuring out where I first appeared.)

He switched to a new train of thought. He worked through each issue, one at a time.

He did not know how, but it was possible his starting point had some special meaning compared to any other coordinate. To make sure he could return at any time, he needed to make a mark on the ground…or was it the floor?

Fortunately, the ground was polished wood, just like in a gym.

It hurt his thumbnail a little, but he was able to scratch an X into it without much difficulty.

(There, now I can move from here. But what am I supposed to search for in this giant floor of a world? Some strange machine? A person? And would they be someone who was here from the beginning or someone who appeared here from somewhere else like me?)

He had only seen a few perfectly triangular mountains when looking around earlier, but he could not help but look around again and again. It may have been a lot like someone searching for an oasis in the desert.

And he was careless.

He had appeared here “suddenly”, so he should have considered the possibility of someone else appearing here “suddenly”.

First, he spotted Index changing quite close by.

And second, he saw Misaka Mikoto watching the two of them from a short distance away.

“Are you kidding me?”

The air grew heavy at an accelerated rate while Kamijou muttered to himself.

He then gave a yell.

“Are you kidding me!? Really, are you kidding me!? From a probability perspective, this is just cruel! Isn’t this a lot like playing Russian roulette ten times in a row and blowing your brains out on the first shot each time!? I don’t care if this is a sudden overseas location shoot for a young comedian or if I’ve been summoned to another world, but at least go through the proper steps for that kind of thing!!”

Kamijou pleaded his case against this unreasonable world, but it fell on two pairs of deaf ears.

The girls spoke with horribly, horribly cold eyes.

“Touma, there are only two options for you now: a really, really long lecture or a chomp that puts you beyond recovery in one go.”

“There really are those true idiots who have the ridiculous ability to stop time or change the world, but only ever think to use it to flip up girls’ skirts.”

Kamijou stared blankly into the distance.

But then he realized he really would die if he tried to escape reality here.

“I don’t think you should do this! That really would be overkill!! Wait! A single boke deserves a single tsukkomi! If you both do it at once, I’ll be destroyed!! W-wait, you idiot!! Don’t start preparing your Railgun like it’s nothing!!”

His appeal was rejected.

The two girls began a nasty combination play in which Mikoto fired her arcade coin in the instant Index latched her jaws onto Kamijou’s right hand.

But just before they did so, an even greater impact shook the entire floor of that world.

The entire earth felt like it was going to capsize like a boat. Kamijou and Index rolled along the ground together, the boy's face ended up pressed against the nun's chest, and the young lady who saw it kicked the spiky soccer ball that was his head. Meanwhile, something else happened.

It began with a low rumble.

It sounded like thick thunder clouds approaching from the distance.

"What is that?" groaned Kamijou as he rolled along with Index.

It was a metal sphere measuring fifty meters across. Its entire surface was packed full of the kind of cannons found on a warship. Especially impressive were the seven main cannons attached to the seven arms extending from its back. They had reached a point where they looked more like towers or bridges than cannons.

It had an upside-down Y-shaped propulsion device at the bottom, but it did not seem to use tires or treads. It was floating, even if just a bit. It was either using an air cushion or static electricity. A ridiculous level of technology had gone into it and that technology had clearly been used solely to make it more deadly. It looked like an entire war packed into a single spot or a crystallization of every negative piece of human technology.

Like a game of air hockey, the mountain of metal slid freely along the polished wooden ground without damaging it. The sight blasted all sense of reality from Kamijou's mind.

Misaka Mikoto rubbed her leather shoe against his pointy head and spoke in utter shock.

"That wasn't there before, was it? Something that huge would stand out as much as a domed stadium. We would've seen it if it had been there."

"It must have suddenly appeared just like us."

That "synonym for war" was firing its many cannons. Each time, a great tremor ran through the earth and knocked the three of them around even though it was not directly targeting them.

But if it was firing, it had to have a target.

That monster was fighting.

But with what?

♦

Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell were known as delinquent soldiers and the pair had just slammed their radios to their feet.

“Dammit!! All of a sudden, the radio won’t connect! And where are we anyway!? There’s a blue sky above but wooden flooring below? Did we wander into some messed-up artist’s painting!?”

“Let’s just pray this isn’t some stupid near-death experience after being blown away by a stray Object shell. Besides!! What is that that’s picked a fight with the Princess!? Is it some biological weapon the Faith Organization developed!?”

Their guardian deity, the Baby Magnum, was making quick movements forward, back, left, and right like a mixed martial artist while also firing its one hundred or so cannons. When its opponent was too close, it would fire its smaller cannons while prepared for some shots to ricochet back. When its opponent was frightened back, it would repeatedly fire its massive main cannons.

But despite all that, this opponent would not go down.

Their knowledge as soldiers told them nothing could fight on the same level as an Object.

So what was this opponent?

A word did come to mind if they left the realm of military jargon and checked in a safe country picture book.

Dragon.

A two hundred meter pitch-black dragon flew through the heavens and bit at the Object.

“This is insane.”

Quenser was about ready to throw his hands in the air and give up.

“This is completely insane!! Is that a dragon!? Wait, the damn thing just about picked up the Princess’s Object! We can just throw common sense out the window once something that huge is picked up like a mouse or a squirrel!!”

The giant mysterious creature was not as quick as the Object. As the two boys watched, the Object fired several shots of its main cannons into the dragon’s spread wings and exposed torso. But its durability must have been astronomical because it continued to fight even as it bled. A situation where the Baby Magnum was not powerful enough surpassed anything they had imagined.

“Hey, student. I don’t care what we have to do, but we’ll be completely isolated if that thing takes the Princess away like some colossal crane game. We’re in trouble if we don’t do something, right?”

“What the hell are we supposed to do against that!?”

“It’s your job to figure that out, Mr. Deadweight!!”

“How about you try using your brain for something other than complaining for once!?”

The two idiots completely ignored the situation and began grappling with each other.

And they received some divine punishment for their trouble.

The Baby Magnum had one of its changeable main cannons set to a railgun and it fired a metal shell larger than a car. The shell hit the black dragon in the torso and was deflected by the exceedingly tough surface of its body.

The main cannon’s shell ricocheted at a sharp angle and fell onto the floor-covered earth.

“Ah.”

They did not even have time to shout “Jesus”.

A moment later, Quenser and Heivia were thrown into a vortex of explosive noise.

♦

“Hmm.”

The Princess tilted her head inside the Baby Magnum’s cockpit.

She had short blonde hair and a slender build. She would look right at home being chauffeured to a high-class girl’s school in a safe country, but she was the Pilot Elite for one of the colossal weapons known as Objects. She was pinned down by extremely high inertial Gs that exceeded those of a fighter jet, even the movements of her eyes were read by her special goggles to help control the machine, and she was the brain of the monster that swept across the battlefield with its greater than one hundred cannons, both large and small.

However…

She had gone through the radio communication process a number of times now, but there was no sign of reaching anyone.

She continued firing on the unknown dragon-like enemy even as she suspected she was experiencing a cyber-attack that made a nonexistent enemy appear on her display.

“I have a feeling something was caught in the crossfire there, but whatever.”

♦

“Oh?”

Extremely long black hair that reached the ankles, a glamorous body that did not suit her name, and a red yukata wrapped around that body. An older girl who was far too sexy to be called a Zashiki Warashi tilted her head.

A metallic creaking filled the air.

Her slender hand was held up next to her face.

The palm had easily grabbed a metal shell larger than a car. There was not so much as a scratch on the Zashiki Warashi herself. How and why had she survived that mass weapon? There was no real point in asking those questions. Youkai were unaffected by mere physical attacks and the laws of physics were twisted into obeying that rule.

Two uniformed boy soldiers were curled up at her feet, but she showed no sign of caring.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but it looks like I’ve gotten myself caught in an unnecessary fight. And I’m really not the type to want to do any work at all.”

Nearby, a boy was flipped on his back with his eyes spinning in circles. He was Jinnai Shinobu, a resident of the house the Zashiki Warashi lived in. He had not been hit by the shell itself or by the secondary shockwave, but the mental shock had been enough to shake his consciousness.

A flat-chested Yuki Onna crouched next to the boy and poked at his cheek.

There was an odd ecstasy in her expression.

“Heh…eh heh heh. He’s still somewhat conscious, but he can’t move very much right away. In other words, this is my chance to create something that inseparably links us together. Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh.”

“Before you finish removing your kimono and mounting him, how about you look up in the sky?”

“Hmph. Nothing I see is going to stop me now.”

“Yeah, but that thing looks raring to go, too. I think it’s about to attack.”

The heavens were blocked from view.

The black dragon that had been attacking the strange mass of metal had shifted its focus to the Zashiki Warashi and Yuki Onna.

But before it did, the Yuki Onna’s eyelids twitched slightly.

That was all it took.

A gust of wind grew deadly. That wind of death would freeze anything to negative fifty degrees. There was no obvious beam of light or roar of noise, but it would bring certain death to any creature on the planet earth. The local ecosystem was rearranged in an absolute attack that meant the demise of all that relied on water, air, and the sun to live.

And it was especially effective on one category of life.

“No matter how big it might be, it’s still based on a reptile and is thus cold-blooded. If the air was hot or cold to begin with, that would be one thing, but it is not made to withstand a sudden change in temperature. It can be easily stopped simply by cooling the local climate.”

Before it could flap its giant wings and before it could fire a strange beam of light from its massive maw, its hopelessly large two hundred meter body dropped helplessly down like a poorly made paper airplane. A portion of the never-ending gym floor was destroyed as the black dragon was taken down.

The pressure sent wind flying out in every direction and the wind grew into a visible wall as it whipped up dust. It slammed into the Zashiki Warashi and Yuki Onna’s bodies and continued on.

The Yuki Onna gave a triumphant look.

“Heh heh. Anyone who interrupts someone’s love deserves to be frozen in ice.”

“That’s fine and all, but I think Shinobu’s about to enter cold sleep down between your legs there.”

♦

Not far away, two people watched in annoyance as the giant weapon, black dragon, and Youkai fought.

They were Anzai Kyousuke and Higashikawa Mamoru.

They themselves were both completely normal Japanese college students.

“Oh, c’mon. What kind of Absurdity did we get caught up in this time?”

“We weren’t thrown into some weird amusement park, so we might still be safe. Although if this turns out to be some kind of Hollywood movie village, I’m giving up and going to sleep right here.”

Some people who could clearly ignore the laws of physics were moving about in front of them, but they made no attempt to approach them. They only wanted to live a peaceful life, so if they happened across a giant robot, they would not get in. If they saw a

mysterious device that let them use magic at the push of a button, they would walk right on by. If a girl fell from the sky, they would leave her with the police.

However…

“Oh, c’mon!! Please don’t blame everything on Karen-chan, the seductive bunny girl☆”

When a shrill voice reached their ears from directly behind, the two grown men gave a large start.

But they maintained their original intention.

If things seemed dangerous, they would try not to get involved.

Without turning around, Anzai and Higashikawa took off running while looking straight ahead.

“Oh, that’s just mean!! You’re supposed to give a nice surprised reaction while shouting ‘Why you of all people!?’ or ‘I thought you were dead!!’ Wait upppp!!”

“Not good! I can hear her annoyed ‘boo, boo’ and it isn’t getting any farther away!! She’s actually approaching us!?”

“Don’t turn around! We must have been thrown inside a space where looking back is forbidden!!”

♦

Satsuki was a girl also known as a Killer Queen. Nanajou Kyouichirou was a boy who could somehow just barely survive no matter what happened to him.

They summed up the situation with a single conclusion.

“I want no part of this.”

“The humans are one thing, but some of them clearly aren’t human. And I have no guarantee I can kill something that was never human to begin with.”

“Understood. I don’t really want any part of you right now either.”

♦

A tremendous cracking sound exploded out.

Even after receiving several cannon blasts from the Object and having its life activity weakened on a cellular level by temperatures as low as negative fifty degrees, the black dragon tried to continue its rampage while crouched on the ground.

The closest to it were Quenser, Heivia, the Zashiki Warashi, the Yuki Onna, and Jinnai Shinobu.

However, all of the people scattered there saw what happened next.

A single line of light seemed to pierce through the world itself as it stabbed into the black dragon.

It had been fired from the peak of one of the oddly perfect triangular mountains that resembled pyramids. It tore open the heavens, passed over everyone's heads, and easily stabbed through the black dragon that had withstood such fierce attacks before.

It had not even given time to cry out.

It had been produced by what could be called a divine spear and it sent the two hundred meter monster rolling along the ground. It rolled in the wind like an empty can or a tumbleweed in a Western duel. Kamijou was just about caught in its path, but he leaped to the side with all his might to avoid it. The black dragon continued without end, rolled over the horizon several kilometers away, and vanished. A low rumble reached them and a pillar of water rose into the air (which given the distance had to be as tall as a mountain), so it seemed there was a body of water at the end of this world.

A crackling electric charge lingered in the air.

Kamijou Touma gulped, Quenser and Heivia had been knocked onto their backs, Jinnai Shinobu was still encased in ice, Anzai Kyousuke and Higashikawa Mamoru stared up into the heavens, and Nanajou Kyouichirou was beginning to think he should stop relying on his ability to not die when he was killed.

They all turned to face the distant mountain, but at two or three kilometers away, none of them could tell who or what was standing at its peak.

♦

"…"

After producing that impressive amount of damage, "she" silently left the peak of that neatly shaped mountain.

"She" did not look back.

Her armor produced an eerie sound as it scraped together and her long golden hair scattered a gentle floral scent in the opposite direction.

“She” carried a short boy with her as “she” continued to her destination.

♦

This was a strange world where “everything” gathers.

This is a story that contains a once-in-a-lifetime chance to overturn the normal and a sense of danger that eliminates the usual.

CHAPTER 1

[Series Introduction 02]

Killer Queen and Deep End

A killer whose method of murder fascinates people too much and cannot be handled with a normal investigation or normal reporting. This is a story of the darkness consigning those killers to the darkness.

第一章

【シリーズ紹介その2】
殺人妃とディープエンド

あまりにも人を魅了する殺害方法を取る殺人鬼は、もはや通常の捜査や報道では扱われない。これは、そんな殺人鬼達を、闇から闇へ裁く話。

Part 1

They gathered at one point on the strange “wooden earth” that looked like a gym floor stretched on and on to the horizon.

In all, they were Kamijou Touma, Index, Misaka Mikoto, Quenser Barbotage, Heivia Winchell, Jinnai Shinobu (Status Effect: Freeze), Zashiki Warashi Yukari, the Yuki Onna, Anzai Kyousuke, Higashikawa Mamoru, the bunny girl, Nanajou Kyouichirou, and Satsuki.

That may not seem like quite enough, but unfortunately, Lieutenant Milinda Brantini aka the Princess was still inside the Baby Magnum. She must have run into some kind of trouble because communications were cut off and she was showing no sign of leaving the machine.

They had gathered in one spot to help grasp the situation, but it was obvious why they had gathered there specifically.

Whether one called it the ground or the floor, there was a perfect square of a hole in it with one meter sides.

Kamijou crouched down and peered inside. He saw wooden stairs leading down and a soft light that seemed to be from some kind of lighting.

His pointy head spoke.

“Welcome to the dungeon…I guess.”

The wooden earth continued as far as the eye could see and the distant square pyramid mountains looked like they were made from polygons. To be honest, it was a complete mystery where this was or how they had ended up here, but it would have been difficult to find anything besides the square hole to investigate.

“Hmm… We must have been set as the target of some kind of summoning, but not even my 103,000 grimoires can determine the exact system. Don’t tell me this was a technique on a level that only a Magic God could explain.”

“Wait,” cut in Mikoto. “What is this girl talking about?”

“At any rate, we should need the same technique to get back home. Ignoring who used the spell or how, we need to investigate everything we can to learn about the technique.”

“Oh, no. I think his ability to ignore me has infected her too!!”

Quenser and Heivia were focused on something else entirely.

“Hey, Sir Knight. They’re all boy-girl groups, so why are we the only one’s stuck with another guy?”

“We’ve got the Princess over there. Her defenses are a little strong, though.”

“Wow! Screw you! That’s just gonna lead to the usual pattern of you two sticking together while I’m left all on my lonesome!!”

“Complaining isn’t going to help and we don’t have any other choice here.”

“So we were called here in groups of two or three, right? So if one of the guys bites it, don’t you think we could ‘take their place’ if you know what I’m saying?”

“Hah hah! Great idea! So you’re saying if you die, I can have a lovely lady in both hands!? Then let’s do it! C’mon, Frolaytia! Or maybe the Information Alliance’s Oh Ho Ho!!”

As Heivia pulled out his combat knife and Quenser shoved a clay-like explosive in his awful friend’s mouth, the overly suggestive bunny girl peered down into the square hole just like Kamijou.

“Something this big is pretty abnormal, but it looks manmade. Is it some kind of ruins? Going in seems like the quickest way of figuring out what’s going on.”

College student Anzai Kyousuke gave an annoyed response.

“Yeah, but that isn’t giving a single thought to our safety. We don’t even know if it has any windows. We’d be goners if the lights went out after we’d made our way deep inside.”

They all exchanged a glance.

This seemed to be the only place to investigate, but none of them wanted to go in.

“Um…”

The one who went out of the way to raise her hand before speaking was the girl known as a Killer Queen.

“I understand investigating inside is risky, but can we really say it’s safe to stay here?”

“Why not?” asked Mikoto.

The girl pointed straight up toward the heavens.

“That…what was it? My common sense is harshly rejecting the use of that six-letter word beginning with a ‘d’, so I’ll beat around the bush and call it a massive black reptile. Anyway, ‘that’ could easily fly back here, couldn’t it?”

Another unpleasant silence fell over them all.

Not many people would actually want to fight the dragon (if that was really what it should be called) and just as few would want to get caught in the blast from one of the Baby Magnum's stray shots. They had survived earlier thanks to the mysterious intruder, but nothing said that would happen the next time. It was even possible that intruder would show up as an enemy.

Both continuing on and staying put were risky.

After some thought, Kamijou made a suggestion.

"Regardless of what's inside, the corridors don't look very wide down there. If ten or so people swarmed inside at once, we'd clog it up. I don't want to think about it, but if a giant metal ball started chasing us, we'd be wiped out in one shot."

"Touma, then should we stay here?"

"No. If the risk is the same either way, I think we should split into a group to continue on and a group to stay. Personally, I would rather accept the risk and continue on than to shoulder that risk while doing nothing to improve the situation. What about the rest of you? Do you have any hope?"

His question received no response.

Eventually, Nanajou Kyouichirou summed up how they felt.

"Simply going with the flow is easy, but moving on your own is a lot harder than you think it is."

"Then what should we do?"

"I already told you: simply going with the flow is easy. You pick the teams and we'll go along with it. That would be easier."

Kamijou had his doubts that would work, but no one objected. No one started arguing over who got to be the leader either.

(I didn't get myself stuck in an annoying class president position, did I?)

He was unable to clear his doubts, but he had no choice since the majority had agreed to this.

"Hmm."

He brought a hand to his chin and thought for a while. He gave a serious look to the dozen or so people here.

He then pointed at the ones he had chosen for the search team.

Kamijou Touma.

Quenser Barbotage.

Heivia Winchell.

Anzai Kyousuke.

Higashikawa Mamoru.

…

…

…

Once he had chosen that many, someone grabbed his collar from the side.

Quenser moved in close with the deadly serious expression he tended to get after discovering the military conspiracy at around page 300-350 in the latter half of Chapter 3.

“(Wait just a second. Don’t you get what this means, kid?)”

“Eh? Eh? What? What???”

“(You have the authority to put together your party as you see fit, so what kind of idiot chooses nothing but guys for his team!? Are you a celibate monk or something? Are you a hermit that cast aside all worldly desires!?)”

Quenser’s eyes grew so bloodshot that they looked pure red.

“(Don’t you get how juicy an opportunity this is? If you’re a guy, you should. When you can choose your own party, there’s only one option! Right!?)”

Kamijou remade his selection.

Index.

Misaka Mikoto.

Zashiki Warashi Yukari.

The Yuki Onna.

The bunny girl.

…

…

…

Grab!

“Now, the rest of us will be stuck here with nothing but guyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyssssssssssss!!”

“I have no idea what you’re so mad about!! What is with you!?”

After the two boys grappled a bit and shoved at each other’s faces, Mikoto pulled an arcade coin from her skirt pocket and flicked it into the air with her thumb.

She caught it when it fell and made a suggestion.

“This is descending into chaos, so how about we decide this with heads or tails?”

“A coin toss, huh? Well, I guess no one can complain then.”

“Touma, no cheating with that magnet thing you were talking about the other day.”

“Bfh!? I-I would never do that!!” exclaimed Mikoto. “You worry too much!!”

“Bfhwah!! She wasn’t even talking to you and why are you strangling *me*!?” shouted Kamijou.

From there, their fates were decided by a coin toss each.

The results were as follows.

Search Team: Kamijou Touma, Misaka Mikoto, Heivia Winchell, Zashiki Warashi Yukari, Higashikawa Mamoru, the bunny girl, and Nanajou Kyouichirou.

Standby Team: Index, Quenser Barbotage, Milinda Brantini (lost by default), Jinnai Shinobu (Status Effect: Freeze), the Yuki Onna, Anzai Kyousuke, and Satsuki.

The white nun placed a hand on her chin and muttered to herself.

“I feel like someone cheated.”

“E-enough baseless accusations!!”

Mikoto blushed and shouted at the nun while Heivia secretly clenched his fist.

“Yes! An older girl with a huge rack and a bunny girl! This feels just like getting a good hand after a never-ending losing streak in poker!!”

“Are you sure you should be that happy?” asked Quenser. “I feel like both of them have a hidden sharpness that’s different again from Frolaytia’s.”

Incidentally, the Princess had yet to leave the Baby Magnum and perhaps *could not* leave, so she had lost by default. Jinnai Shinobu had also been unable to take part in the coin toss because he was trapped in a coffin of ice and the Yuki Onna was snuggled up against him while drooling in absolute ecstasy. She was even saying “Now I can be with you forever and ever. Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh.” like someone with a terminal case of yandere.

And with that decided, things were finally set in motion.

Part 2

The batteries of their watches and other electronics were still functioning, so they knew the time. After agreeing to meet back up in two hours’ time, they began their labyrinth exploration tour.

“But Touma, there’s no way you can finish investigating these ruins in two hours.”

“We just have to figure out if the area around the entrance is safe. After that, we can all head down and use it as our base. Isn’t that better than hanging around up here where it’s open in every direction and that monster could find us again at any time?”

Kamijou Touma, Misaka Mikoto, Heivia Winchell, Zashiki Warashi Yukari, Higashikawa Mamoru, the bunny girl, and Nanajou Kyouichirou made their way underground through the square hole in the wooden ground.

They found a long corridor at the bottom of the stairs. It was about the size of a school hallway, but the floor, walls, and ceiling were all wood and it took an excessive number of turns. And instead of smooth curves, it made countless sharp turns at perfect right angles.

There were lights on the ceiling at a set interval. The outside of the lights was glass, but it was unclear what was contained inside. They did not seem like lightbulbs or fluorescent lights, but they were not torches or gas lamps either. They looked like a group of glowing particles or bioluminescent winged insects gathered in one place. Altogether, they produced soft flesh-colored light.

“I don’t get this place.”

Heivia must not have liked the unnecessarily complicated path of the corridor because he drew his sidearm instead of his assault rifle.

“Is this to keep out intruders? To get them lost? But if you just wanted to throw off their sense of direction or equilibrium, adding in a bunch of irregular curves would be easier.”

“Don’t ask me,” cheerfully added the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata.

“Anyway, here’s another stairway down. What should we do?”

“Why not try going down it?”

Kamijou’s casual suggestion settled it for them.

The interior below was exactly the same.

“Here’s another stairway.”

“Let’s try going down it.”

The interior was exactly the same.

“Another stairway.”

“Let’s try going down it.”

“Another stairway.”

“Let’s go down.”

“Stairway.”

“Go down.”

“Stairs.”

“Down.”

At some point, someone realized something.

Specifically, it was Nanajou Kyouichirou who gave a shout while looking around.

“Hey, wait! How many floors down is this!? Where are we!?”

“Ah.”

Kamijou looked around again, but there were of course no helpful floor number on the wall and every floor’s interior was identical. There was nothing to tell them which floor this was.

They frantically ran back up a floor, but they could not find the next stairway up. They walked along the corridor for a while and found some stairs, but they had no way of knowing if these were the same stairs they had come from.

“This isn’t good,” said Kamijou, sounding annoyed. “I can’t trust myself for anything now. I’m not even sure where the stairs down are anywhere.”

Meanwhile, the bunny girl tilted her head (in an inappropriately cute way).

“Hmm. Did anyone scratch marks on the wall, tie a thread to themselves, drop bread crumbs, or use a convenient auto-mapping device?”

“Do I really look smart enough to have done any of that?” spat back Heivia.

However, the Zashiki Warashi cut in from the side.

“Oh? But that handheld device strapped to you has been blinking for a while now. You mean it wasn’t downloading map data?”

“N-no! This is, um….!!”

“What? You’ve got a military map?” asked college student Higashikawa Mamoru.

Kamijou Touma latched onto something else.

“You mean you’ve got a signal here!? Ah, crap. My cell isn’t. But we can still call for help with that, right!?”

“No, wait! This is filled with military secrets! I can’t let just anyone touch it!!”

Kamijou and the others ignored Heivia’s complaints and ripped away the pouch and surface fastener holding the device. Its transmission light was indeed flashing, so there some kind of data communication was underway.

Wondering what it was, Kamijou peered down at the screen.

It was simply downloading a porn video.

“Why!? This is such a waste!! And it’s so high resolution too!! What the hell!? It’s only ten minutes long, so why is the file so big!?”

“Guys need this as much as food! …No, wait! Don’t cancel the download, you idiot!! Now I have to wait another whole hour!!”

“Don’t be silly,” said the Zashiki Warashi. “Are you sure it wasn’t just trying to continue the broken download?”

“No, the god of downloads is here today. My device is in a good mood. I…!! I refuse to give up!!”

Heivia shouted and wept while anthropomorphizing a number of things, so the others chose to ignore him.

But then…

“Hm?”

“I can hear something. But what is this sound?”

Kamijou and the bunny girl frowned as the mystery sound grew gradually louder. Something was approaching, but they could not imagine what. It was not footsteps, not flapping feathers, and not tires or treads either. If anything, it sounded like ice being scraped away, but they could not imagine what that sound meant.

“Something’s coming,” muttered Nanajou Kyouichirou.

With tears in his eyes, Heivia aimed his .50 caliber military handgun down the corridor.

The Zashiki Warashi had the unfair ability to negate all physical attacks, but she approached the edge of the corridor as if to say she wanted nothing to do with this.

Kamijou and Mikoto focused on the sound as well.

Nanajou Kyouichirou once more urged them to be cautious.

“Something’s coming! Be careful!!”

They were inside a complex dungeon and they had only their imaginations to tell them what that sound was. Someone was definitely approaching and the feel of the air gradually changed. And just as warned, something arrived. It moved out from one of the many right angle turns that prevented them from seeing further down the corridor.

And they saw just what it was.

It was a giant luxurious sofa moving swiftly along the ground like it was ice skating.

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

None of them knew how to react.

Not that they wanted to find a ferocious beast created by increasing the size of a lion or a next-generation iron maiden that moved around semi-automatically in search of its next victim. They certainly did not want that. But still. Was this really possible? Could their enemy really be a speedy sofa?

Dumbfounded, Kamijou shook his head.

“This must have some special meaning based on some kind of authentic passage of text, but Index is supposed to explain all that and she isn’t with us! We’re taking this seriously and we aren’t just messing around, but this surreal scene is nothing but a tragedy!!”

“While you lament, the surreal sofa’s getting closer. Damn, it looks to be seventy to eighty kilos. We can’t take this lightly. Wouldn’t that be like getting hit by a moped!?”

Heivia pulled his handgun’s trigger repeatedly.

At .50 caliber, it produced tremendous destruction without any special bullets such as dumdum rounds or hollow-point rounds. Someone who did not care about wildlife preservation treaties could take out a large tiger with a single shot using one.

But Heivia had forgotten one fundamental fact.

“Huh? Wait. How am I supposed to kill furniture!? This thing doesn’t have heart or a fuel tank!!”

Explosions of stuffing flew from the hit areas of the sofa, but it did not even slow down.

“Oh, no!” shouted Higashikawa Mamoru. “Get out of the way! Don’t be fooled by how it looks! This thing’s dangerous!!”

“Ah.”

Nanajou Kyouichirou failed to escape in time.

No one covered for him or pushed him out of the way. Instead, they heartlessly pressed their backs against either wall.

The sofa slammed into him.

The impact struck him below the knees, taking out his legs and making him fall over. He tumbled onto the sofa and the "enemy" never slowed. It maintained its speed and disappeared down the next right angle turn in the opposite direction. And it was of course still carrying its victim.

The situation was surreal to the end.

Just before he vanished, Nanajou Kyouichirou looked more troubled than frightened.

That was why Kamijou just watched him go. Frozen in place after turning around, he spoke

"What in the world are we supposed to do?"

"I'm not sure if I should laugh or not," added Heivia as he shrugged with a smoking handgun in one hand.

Part 3

For Index, Quenser Barbotage, Jinnai Shinobu (Status Effect: Freeze), the Yuki Onna, Anzai Kyousuke, and the Killer Queen of the standby team, it was obvious what they had to do first.

Quenser pointed at the colossal weapon known as an Object that towered over fifty meters tall in the distance.

"Let's think of a way to contact our Princess. If that dragon thing shows up again, it makes a huge difference whether we can use the Baby Magnum or not."

"You say that." Anzai Kyousuke frowned. "But the only person here who would know about radios and transmissions would be you. I'm just a college student, so I don't know much about the hardware or the software."

"Not to worry, not to worry. If you're a student, you're the same as me. In fact, you're above me if you're in college. Things like the relationship that radio waves and reflected waves have with a vertical rod are required material for just about any major these days, right? So help me out here."

“This is hopeless. There’s something wrong with your standards.”

“Eh? But it’s no different from the TV antennae you see on the roofs of houses.”

“Either way, that isn’t something you do ‘while you’re at it’ like getting a teaching license. Can anyone else help?”

Anzai looked around, but the Yuki Onna was rubbing her cheek against Cold Sleep Shinobu’s ice coffin with a look of ecstasy, Index was dangerously muttering “shaved ice”, and Satsuki raised the danger to 120% by saying “I don’t have much detailed knowledge outside of human anatomy.” The situation was tragic enough to make Anzai wonder if anyone here was any help at all. He felt like he was in a nursery.

“My radio seems to be working without issue.”

Quenser messed with his device while approaching the Baby Magnum, so the other members decided to follow him.

“Which means the problem is probably on the Baby Magnum’s end.”

“How are we supposed to check on that?” asked Anzai Kyousuke while tilting back his head as far as it would go.

The machine was fifty meters tall, the spherical main body had an upside-down Y-shaped static electricity propulsion device attached to the bottom, and seven arms with seven main cannons extended from the rear joint. To a puny human standing less than two meters tall, even climbing up it would be difficult.

It was a massive and dense collection of steel. On that scale, it could have easily used up an entire mine’s worth.

The Killer Queen turned her gaze from the spherical main body and to the one hundred or so various cannons pointing in every direction.

“Where are its antennae?”

“It has a few specialized ones, but the armor panels and cannon barrels also function as auxiliary antennae. Just assume each cannon has multiple targeting cameras, sensors, and radars.”

Faced with that legitimate tool of war, that killer from a peaceful country concluded it would be best to give up on trying to understand that monster’s specs.

She then asked another question.

“Is there anything specific we can help with?”

“I’d like some advice on how to climb up.”

He heard a sound much like a whip cracking at the air. It came from Satsuki. Something like a black belt had appeared in her hand at some point. It was a ring of rubber that worked far better than a bicycle tire. One end was wrapped around the bridge-like main cannon passing by overhead.

Before anyone could say a word, the Killer Queen moved her hand again.

More rubber belts wrapped around the bodies of Quenser, Anzai Kyousuke, and the others on the ground.

“Wha-…?”

There was no time to protest.

After a short lag of only a few moments, the tightly stretched rubber released all of the gathered force so it could return to normal. The six people (one of them in ice) flew up into the air.

They ascended the fifty meters in about 1.3 seconds.

Quenser felt an unpleasant sensation like his ears were clogged.

“Ugweh!!”

The next thing he knew, he was standing on top of one of the seven main cannons.

He looked around in confusion, but Satsuki spoke to him with calm eyes.

“Now, do your investigation.”

“It isn’t often I meet a woman more dangerous than our commander,” he muttered while jogging along the metal bridge that was the cannon.

He was making his way toward the base. His simple handheld toolbox was something like a multi-tool knife, so he could not exactly use it to take apart and investigate sensitive military equipment.

But after touching and investigating the main cannon’s targeting sensors by hand, he was able to reach a conclusion.

“The cameras and sensors themselves are working. They’re focusing on my movements.”

“What does that mean?”

“We don’t have time to check all of the antennae and sensors. If I did that alone, it would seriously take over a month. But if the ones here are working, it probably isn’t a hardware issue. You could say the wiring inside is like a spider web or built to work in parallel or whatever, but it means severing a wire somewhere isn’t going to keep the signal from getting through. In that case, is it an internal problem? In other words, a software issue?”

“You still haven’t answered what all that means.”

“I can’t determine the cause or find a way to fix it. With my handheld device, it would take days to search through the massive amount of control scripts in the Object. Plus, I’m not a programming specialist.”

“So there’s nothing we can do?” asked an annoyed Anzai Kyousuke.

Satsuki tilted her head.

“Can you open the hatch from the outside?”

Quenser shrugged at that.

“An official maintenance soldier would know how, but the method is top secret. They wouldn’t tell a battlefield student that.”

It was obvious if you thought about it, but having a weapon that could withstand a nuke would be meaningless if just anyone could open it up. It would be a problem if it could be kicked open like a bike lock.

“So what does that mean? Are we stuck?”

Anzai placed a hand over his eyes and stared into the distance. He was probably worried that the dragon might come back. Several mountains cut off their view of the horizon, but they were all perfectly shaped pyramids.

Index must have been hungry already because she had lost her energy, but she spoke up now.

“Can’t you wave your hands at it instead of using that ‘radio’ thing?”

“Wave my hands?”

Quenser frowned, so Index extended her arms perfectly straight and then methodically bent them at right angles.

He finally realized what she meant.

“Semaphore?”

Part 4

Kamijou and the others searched around here and there.

Nanajou Kyouichirou had been abducted by the far-too-surreal enemy that was a quickly moving sofa, but they found him in a room on the same underground floor.

He looked dazed and his bangs were a mess like a physical comedian who had fallen victim to the following gag: 'Go wait in your dressing room for a bit!' → The floor opens to reveal a pitfall → A trip down a steep slide.

"Eh? Eh? Wh-what? What is going on?"

"Oh, I guess he's still alive."

That surprisingly cruel comment came from Mikoto.

Kamijou Touma, Heivia, and Higashikawa Mamoru did not speak a word. Perhaps due to the fact that they had failed to rescue him because it wasn't a beautiful girl being abducted.

The Zashiki Warashi noticed what lay around the room. The Nanajou boy was weakly sitting with his legs collapsed to the side, but the room also contained a bus stop sign, the kind of elephant placed in front of drugstores, a Jizou statue, and a giant Shigaraki ware tanuki.

"Do you think this is set up so everything that sofa touches is brought back here?"

"You're kidding. So this is like the failure room on a map filled with warp points or conveyer belts? Y'know, the ones where you're always sent back to the beginning. That means we're going to find ourselves back in this room quite a bit."

Kamijou sounded annoyed, but giving up would not improve their situation.

They knew they would not find any important information or facilities near the failure room, but they still felt like they had to check behind every single door.

The bunny girl asked Heivia a question.

"What do you think?"

"Seems likely."

The room contained a single table, a few chairs placed irregularly around it, and enough plates and mugs for a few people. The grilled salmon and cooked potatoes on the plates were cold, but they looked like they had been partially eaten.

“What is this place anyway?”

Higashikawa Mamoru spoke from the door without stepping into the room.

“If we were in some ancient ruins, I might think it was a king’s tomb or something, but it definitely looks like someone lives here. Is it some kind of shelter?”

“This isn’t enough to know for sure. This could be the grave keeper’s room for all we know.”

They checked other nearby doors and found more strange rooms that made no sense at first glance.

For example, one room contained only three giant treasure chests lined up in a row. The Zashiki Warashi sighed and spoke.

“It would be a little too on the nose, but do you think there are steel swords and armor inside?”

“I feel more like it’s only meant to look like that and they’re spring-loaded so the box will chomp shut on us.”

For example, one room contained an abandoned casino filled with poker tables and slot machines.

“Hey, maybe our luck’s finally turning around. Poker and roulette might be out, but it looks like we can play the slots without anyone here.”

“Don’t. These things will be rigged to eat up everything we’ve earned so far. Look, there’s no sign of a bank or a save point anywhere!”

For example, one room contained a large shower room with nothing but nozzles hanging down from the ceiling like in a prison or at a school pool.

Grab!!

“(Hey, kid. Based on the standards set by the entire human race, there’s no way we can just pass this one by, right!?)”

Heivia grabbed Kamijou’s collar and began some direct talks with the same expression he normally got at around page 350 to 400 when the war looked like it was going to drag on.

“(That older girl in the kimono and that bunny girl are clearly hiding a really nice body below their clothes, so what is there left to hope for if we pass right by the showers? Right!? You know what I mean, don’t you!?)”

“After everything we’ve seen, doesn’t this look like a trap to you? The tiles are pink and the walls are needlessly made of glass, so this is blatantly suspicious!”

“Quit trying to sound clever, moron! I already know you’re the same as me, so surely there have been times when you’ve known something was a scam but still clicked the agree button. If a girl in your class said she’s show you her tits if you broke thirty roof tiles with your forehead, you’d keep at it until your head was a bloody pulp, wouldn’t you!?”

“I-I… Kamijou Touma has no idea what you are talking about.”

“When the options are to go for it and regret it or chicken out and regret it, we’re the ones that grab the imaginary steering wheel and swerve over to break through the mountain pass guardrail!! So quite hesitating! It may be cliché and it may seem silly, but we have to stick to the tried-and-true classics and run straight toward the steamy shower sceeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeene!!”

Someone grabbed Kamijou and Heivia by the back of the neck and lifted them up like in the crane game.

It was the Zashiki Warashi who could casually wield great strength in addition to ignoring physical attacks.

She tossed the two boys into the shower room and twisted the wheel-shaped faucet on the wall to spray a shower of cold water down from the ceiling.

Then it was Misaka Mikoto’s turn.

A tremendous high-voltage current surged from her bangs and a storm of bluish-white electricity enveloped the shower room.

“Fwa ha ha ha ha! Is that all? This is like a reward for meeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

“Wait! I! Stop! Such misfortuuuuuuuuuuuune!”

His inability to make his protests in full added to his misfortune.

No one showed any concern for the two boys whose legs were twitching like a frog’s in a science experiment (even if one of them had been falsely accused).

“I feel like every room in here is a trap, including that room of half-eaten food,” said Mikoto with an exasperated sigh. “After all, if this was the third or fourth day of our exploration, we’d be ready to get into a fistfight over a cup of water. You would probably worry about poison in untouched food, but you might actually assume half-eaten food is safe.”

“And we don’t actually know who ate it or if they only tore some food away with a knife and fork,” added the bunny girl.

For some reason, she sounded *very, very* happy about it and Higashikawa Mamoru looked annoyed by that.

“So can we ignore all of the rooms around here?” he asked.

Nanajou Kyouichirou continued from there.

“Well, we are near the room that weird sofa took me to. Yeah, they must gather all the intruders on the floor to the one spot, put them at ease, and then have every room around them be a trap. Anyone who’s suddenly brought here will search everything around them to gather as much information as they can, so if they’re all dead-ends, this is a pretty cruel layout.”

With that, they continued on while ignoring the excessively numerous doors.

But even if they knew a plethora of traps had been set up, it gave them no hint what this giant manmade structure actually was.

They had assumed there would be some kind of family crest if it was a king’s tomb like the pyramids.

Kamijou glanced around and spoke.

“Just with what we’ve seen, this place is too big to build in just a year. And who knows how much farther it goes. From a financial standpoint and an effort standpoint, they would have needed a reason for building it that an entire nation wanted to get behind.”

After travelling about one hundred meters in an arbitrary direction, the rush of doors petered out. The corridor began to take irregular right angle turns again and there were no doors or stairs to be found.

They began to grow anxious as the corridor continued on and on.

They were worried they would find a dead-end and have to walk all the way back.

However, that fear proved groundless.

The long, long corridor led to a single thick door. It was clearly different from the many doors they had passed by.

Kamijou stared at it and spoke.

“We don’t need a special Gold Key or Silver Key to get through, do we?”

“If so, I can always just shoot out the lock or the hinges. Whatever the case might be, we can get this thing open right away.”

The pointy-haired boy grabbed the knob.

He was afraid of getting a high-voltage shock as soon as he turned it, but that did not happen.

The knob easily turned and the door opened inward.

And inside, they found…

“What…is this?”

Part 5

That synonym for war stood over fifty meters tall and could withstand a direct hit from a nuclear weapon. The First Generation Baby Magnum of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion contained Milinda Brantini aka the Princess, a girl with short blonde hair who wore a special skintight suit.

The control system included eight levers of various sizes, several hundred buttons, and even special goggles to track the movements of her eyes. Not only would a normal person be unable to pilot it, they would have no idea how to even sit at the controls properly. But that was not surprising considering that there was no optimum design for an Object cockpit interface and no two were the same. The Princess could freely control the Baby Magnum, but even she would have to give up if it were another Object.

It was also the most comfortable place for her (although some suspected it had been designed to make her think that). While most people would think of their bedroom or bathroom as a place to relax, she would immediately think of the cockpit to a deadly weapon.

(Hmm.)

She pulled a sports drink and a ham and potato salad sandwich from the cockpit’s mini-fridge and thought cheerfully to herself.

(Still another 300 seconds until the communication system comes back up. But what even caused this? It’s protected against electromagnetic pulses, so noise or a surge of electricity shouldn’t have harmed the software.)

Data from the hundreds of cameras and sensors was gathered, countless small windows opened on the monitor in front of her, and they all displayed a bar indicating the system

recovery. Like bubbles on the water surface, windows would disappear as soon as they appeared, but the overall number was gradually reducing. This meant the Baby Magnum would not be a giant metal coffin; it would actually recover as time passed.

Also, all of the Baby Magnum's high-precision radars and sensors had led to a certain discovery, but she had no way of informing the others.

Communications were down and she did not see any way of leaving.

She felt no claustrophobia and was able to cheerfully eat her sandwich because this was where she normally lived. She had plenty of water, food, and oxygen for the time being, so there was little reason for concern.

(Maybe I should play some golf on my handheld. I doubt I can improve on my score any more, though. …Hm?)

She noticed something outside.

Quenser Barbotage, a boy with the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's emblem on his shoulder, was waving his arms in a systematic way. At first, it was far too primitive for the Princess to know what it meant, but a high-precision image recognition program translated it into words for her.

He was using Legitimacy Kingdom military semaphore.

His simple message was to respond if she could hear him.

(Semaphore, hm?)

The Princess used the main cannon arms on the far left and right to make gestures of her own, but…

"It isn't getting through."

She pouted her lips while sipping on her sports drink through a straw.

It was not a problem with her movements. Quenser and the others simply could not see her gestures properly from atop the Baby Magnum. It was much like a small insect on a human face being unable to tell it was a face at all.

But the Princess's thoughts never made it that far.

When the situation did not improve even after a few attempts at semaphore, she grew a bit irritated.

(A code. I need some other kind of code.)

She tapped her index finger on the control console, but…

(Right. Morse code. That's simpler and will get through to anyone!)

♦

And…

A tremendous roar knocked Quenser and the others from their feet as they stood on the bridge-like main cannon.

"Abah! Ababah! Abababababababababah!?"

The pure white nun named Index put on an expression she would never have let Kamijou Touma see.

Quenser was at least a little used to war, but even he got on all fours and held his ears.

"Dammit! What the hell is going on? Is she fighting another enemy somewhere!?"

"I-it doesn't look like it," said the Killer Queen as she grimaced and looked around.

Meanwhile, the large-scale shellfire continued.

The swirling noise and shockwaves were enough to shake up the contents of a human skull, but surprisingly, this was actually the smallest cannon in the Object's repertoire.

College student Anzai Kyousuke was left twitching on the metal surface, but he still managed to speak to Quenser. Even so, he seemed doubtful his voice could be heard over the explosive roar.

"Hey!! This happened!! Right after your semaphore!! Didn't it!?"

"Y-yeah. What about it!?"

"I don't know what's going on, but I have a feeling this isn't going to end until you tell the person controlling it to stop. Get back to your semaphore! Hurry!!"

Quenser tried to stand back up, but another massive blast knocked him down again. This went beyond anything one could power through with focus or willpower. The noise was physically shaking up his inner ear.

But…

"Eh heh heh. Eh heh heh heh heh. I'm not sure how to put it, but the happiness won't stop."

The Yuki Onna was pressed up against the ice coffin (which contained Jinnai Shinobu much like a piece of candy with a caterpillar inside) and she was using her Youkai ability to ignore physical attacks to maintain her look of ecstasy within the surrounding noise.

And that was why she noticed something.

“Huh? I think this noise has a pattern to it.”

The others finally noticed the dots and dashes of Morse code and realized the Princess was trying to tell them something.

Part 6

There were no windows.

All four walls were filled with monitors and control consoles. Transparent partitions cut across near the center of the room. They looked something like transparent white boards and they displayed countless white dots of unknown meaning.

There was a single table in the center.

Something like a map was spread out, but they had never seen the writing system used on it.

“Wait, are we really having the language barrier thrown at us now? I mean, we don’t even know what language we’re using to speak to each other. ”

“Eh? What was that? There was some weird static and I couldn’t hear you at all.”

Lots of metal pipes moved from the ceiling and to the wall, but they did not seem to carry water or steam. The Zashiki Warashi opened and closed the round covers attached to parts resembling the bell of a trumpet.

“Speaking tubes? I’m not sure if this place is high-tech or low-tech.”

A speaking tube was a device that let people in separate locations speak to each other using the same principle as a stethoscope. It was a lot like the grandfather of internal phone lines.

The ends of speaking tubes were packed in along the wall, so it all looked like a single giant device such as a pipe organ.

“Is this room the core of the entire underground space?” speculated Mikoto.

The countless rooms filled with traps may have been a failed attempt to keep them from reaching here.

But…

“What is this?” muttered Kamijou Touma.

They all must have felt the same. All of the devices in the room were very specialized. Or rather, they were a mixture of high-tech and low-tech that did not seem like a natural evolution of machinery, so it was hard to tell what it was all for. However, one thing among it all was a dead giveaway.

It was located right next to the central table that had a map spread out on it.

A square pedestal rose to a height between Kamijou’s waist and chest. It looked perfect for holding the bust of a school headmaster or for some ugly sculpture, but it did not seem to have been made for that purpose.

It contained something else.

Attached near the top of the front side was a metal wheel measuring about fifty centimeters across. Straight bars were placed around it at a set interval much like bicycle spokes or the lines between pizza slices.

Even if they had never touched one before, anyone would have seen one in photographs or on TV.

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata named the device.

“A ship’s wheel?”

“Wait a second.”

Heivia looked around again.

Unsatisfied with the many monitors and consoles, the room expanded its data displays with the transparent partitions dividing up the room. He looked across the countless flashing dots of light and spoke.

“Come to think of it, this is a lot like a warship’s battle command center.”

If there was a control room with a ship’s wheel, there had to be a rudder it was connected to.

“Does that mean we aren’t underground?” muttered Kamijou in shock. “*We’re on a ridiculously huge ship?*”

Part 7

When the Princess had been unable to grasp her location (because she had seemingly "flown" somewhere), she had made sure to immediately use the Object's massive sensor array to scan the surrounding landscape.

She had reached a conclusion almost right away.

Even from a height of fifty meters, she was on a strange wooden land that continued to the horizon. However, that wooden land had an end or an edge. Everything was surrounded by water and the pyramid-like mountains had been placed there according to a certain set of rules.

Namely, the rules of stealth design that would drastically lower something's radar cross-section.

Just like the early stealth fighters, this ship had a silhouette that appeared constructed from origami.

In all seriousness, it was forty-five kilometers across and yet any device that measured only radar waves would display a dot the same size as for a small fish. If the Baby Magnum had not used a composite of multiple methods, it may have been fooled too. The details of the stealth technology were a mystery because not even the Legitimacy Kingdom could produce results this good.

(It's kind of like a heavy stealth cruiser, but I don't know what technical classification it would fall under. I would call it a missile ship, but it also has catapults for launching aircraft.)

Overall, it resembled a stealth ship, but it was far too big and it had expanded functions added on like a Swiss Army knife. It did not quite fit in the category of battleship, aircraft carrier, supply ship, or missile destroyer. In fact, it included all of their features with more to spare. It was shaped like a ship, but its scale made it more like an artificial island. It was more like seeing a mobile fortress or floating naval port built on a mega-float.

As an embodiment of the idea "just throw it all on there", this colossal weapon may have been created along a different path of the same evolution that led to Objects.

♦

"Seriously? We can see all the way to the horizon, but it's not land? I had assumed this was some kind of manmade ruins what with the wooden floor and all, but I was picturing something attached to the surface of the earth."

The Morse code created through shellfire finally came to an end.

The Yuki Onna had been the only one who could move properly, so Quenser had instructed her to gesture back to the Princess.

And in exchange, the Princess had informed them of the following information.

“This is a forty-five kilometer warship? I’ve certainly never heard of a weapon large enough to carry an Object on it.”

“That’s not the real problem,” cut in Index.

Quenser frowned, so Satsuki continued.

“If this is a ship, where is it headed?”

That made him shudder.

This situation had not come about by chance. Someone had set it up. And that person had the ability to create this ship, send it out, and put it to use. They had free control over a weapon of such overwhelming scale that it could toy with an Object, the weapon which had destroyed the nuclear age with its great military might.

“Where are we being taken?”

Part 8

Anyone with the proper knowledge would have reached a certain conclusion.

The moving seat that had come to crush them came from an event leading up to the battle between Thunder God Thor and Geirröd.

And among the ships of the gods, there was one made by a skilled dwarf that could be folded up like paper and put in a bag, but when unfolded, was large enough to hold all of the war gods as they crossed the sea (which in this case would mean travelling to other worlds).

That mythology was centered on war, so a ship large enough to hold all of the gods related to war would be the same thing as the ultimate warship that contains every last form of firepower in the world.

And that ship was known as the Divine Ship Skíðblaðnir.

Part 9

“She” stood atop an especially tall mountain even on Divine Ship Skíðblaðnir.

It was covered by an over-the-horizon radar which made it look like an insect’s compound eye or a radio telescope ground station. If the radar had been functioning properly, the massive electromagnetic waves would have been enough to fry a human, but while in stealth mode, it was nothing more than a mountain with a nice view.

A metallic clanking sound came from the green armor “she” wore, but it was technically not made of metal. That armor could stop the fangs and claws of the gods’ enemies and an old inscription said it was made from a solidified version of the aurora that colored the night sky.

The swan feather decorations at her ears swayed in the ocean breeze.

“Heimdallr.”

“She” spoke into the empty air.

“The hostility scan is complete. Where they came from and how they got here are still a mystery, but these strangers register only low levels of hostility. They seem to bear no intention of conquering us. We need to continue secretly monitoring the management of Skíðblaðnir, how they passed between worlds, and the disturbance this is sure to cause.”

“Understood. By the way, could you give me the check sheet?”

A male voice directly reached her ears.

“I have already sent it. I don’t mind as long as you follow the official procedure.”

“She” kept a hand on her hip as she observed the strangers regrouping from within the ship and on top of the giant weapon (that seemed tiny compared to the divine ship).

“They never begin a fight except for in self-defense and they did not attempt to plunder or destroy the inside of the ship. They don’t let their anger at this unreasonable situation justify any violence either. Some of them appear to be trained in combat, but they are guided by standard ROE and the level of their technology is too low to pose a threat even if they go on a rampage. All they do is fire bullets using gunpowder. Do you really think they pose a threat to us?”

“Not really, no. There are probably quite a few surprises in store for them still.”

“If they show no hostility, we can treat them as guests. And when they’re this weak, protecting them will not be easy. In that way, this is no laughing matter.”

“The ship is about to arrive on the outer edge of the land in the giant’s world of Jötunheimr. If you’re going to contact them, I would suggest doing so before they carelessly head out onto land.”

“You’re right.”

“She” sighed and gently rubbed what was next to her.

It was the head of a small boy clinging to her waist.

“Now, let’s go. It’s time to greet them.”

Part 10

A tremendous beam of light raced through the sky.

They were on a giant ship. After both the search team and standby team had reached that same conclusion, they had regrouped on the deck. If they were on the sea, they would never find an exit no matter how widely they searched the inside. They began discussing whether or not to try moving the ship using the control room filled with blinking lights, but that was when the beam of light arrived.

Kamijou Touma, Index, Misaka Mikoto, Quenser Barbotage, Heivia Winchell, Milinda Brantini (still aboard the Object), Jinnai Shinobu (Status Effect: Freeze), Zashiki Warashi Yukari, the Yuki Onna, Anzai Kyousuke, Higashikawa Mamoru, the bunny girl, Nanajou Kyouichirou, and the Killer Queen all turned toward the rumbling noise.

“Welcome, strangers, to the land forming the base of the World Tree Yggdrasil which connects the nine worlds.”

They saw a woman in a strange outfit that combined green armor with a miniskirt. Her long blonde hair fluttered behind her as she rode a giant white horse, held a spear that had produced the beam of light, had a small boy sitting in front of her, and turned her clever eyes their way.

“I am Waltraute, fourth of the nine Valkyrie sisters. I am one of the maidens of war who uses a divine spear to guide the souls of men and to smite the enemies of the gods.”

Heivia immediately made an unnecessary comment (that all the others were secretly thinking).

“Oh, wow. Look, everyone, I think she’s into little boy-...”

“Very well, strangers. Since I am introducing myself, I will demonstrate my divine power for you.”

A detailed explanation would deserve the labels warning of “violent and grotesque scenes” commonly seen on zombie games, but to put it more simply, a beam of light surged out and the idiot lost one of his remaining lives.

Kamijou was fairly certain he would be unable to eat fried chicken or turkey for a while.

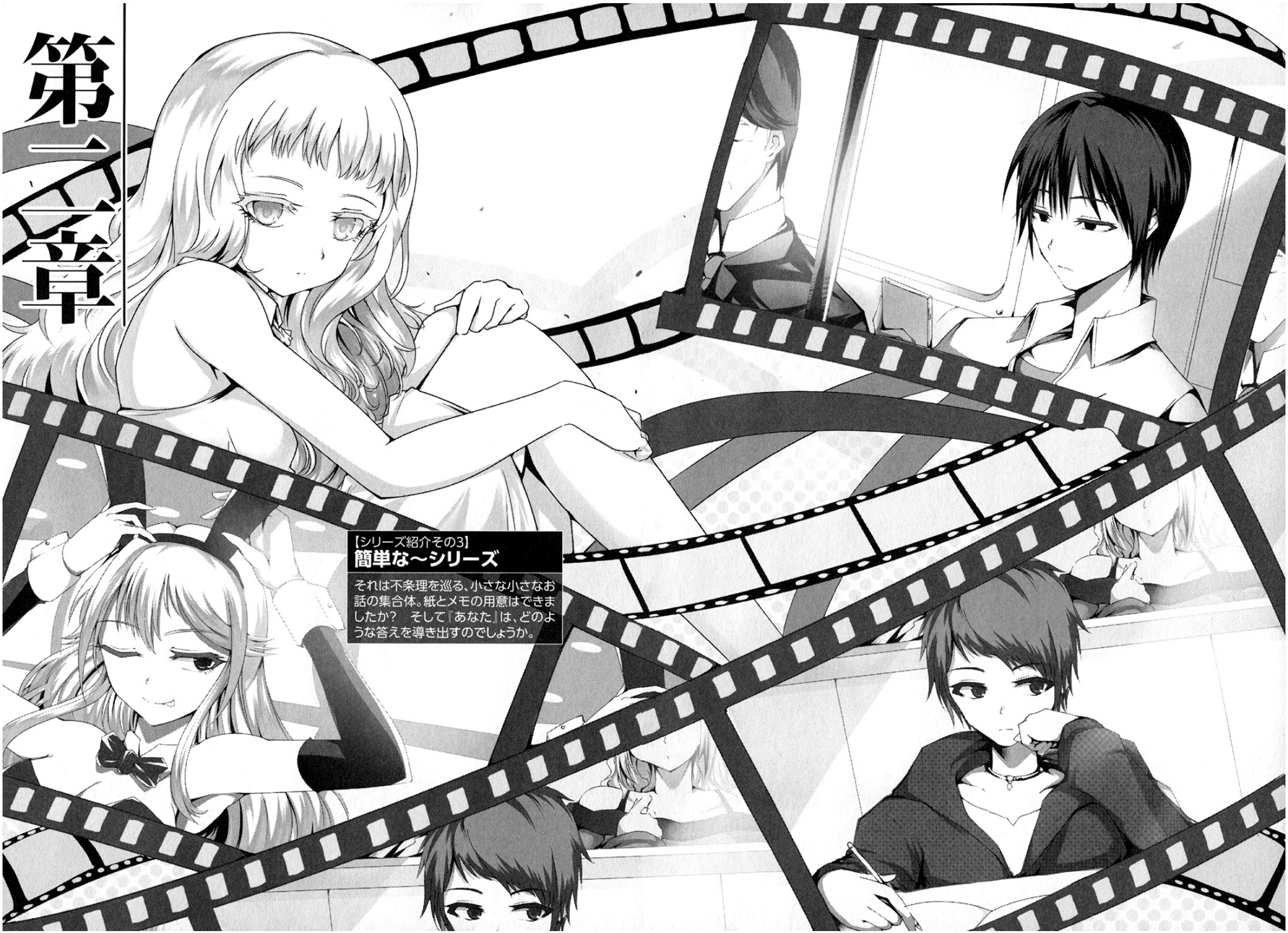
CHAPTER 2

[Series Introduction 03]

A Simple Series

A collection of tiny, tiny stories related to absurdity. Do you have your pen and paper ready? What kind of answer will "you" arrive at?

第二章



【シリーズ紹介その3】
簡単な～シリーズ

それは不条理を巡る、小さな小さなお話の集合体。紙とメモの用意はできましたか？　そして『あなた』は、どのような答えを導き出すのでしょうか。

Part 1

The Divine Ship Skíðblaðni safely arrived on the beach.

The control room had been abandoned and the ship had not been guided from land, but it rode up onto the beach all on its own. Yes, just like a landing ship meant to carry personnel or vehicles onto land. Kamijou was worried it would be stuck on land like a beached whale, but since the blonde lady named Waltraute did not seem worried, he guessed this was the proper way of using it. It must have had a way of returning to sea.

And it was hardly time to be worrying about that anyway.

"Pant, pant."

Kamijou gasped for breath like someone lost in the desert.

They had decided to disembark from the strange ship, but that was no easy task with the Divine Ship Skíðblaðni. It was over forty-five kilometers long and its three-hull structure made it nearly seventeen kilometers wide, so simply disembarking required a lengthy trek.

Quenser was supposedly part of the military, but even he was exhausted.

"D-dammit. Cough, cough. This is just wrong. I know I shouldn't be saying this, but bigger doesn't necessarily mean better!! A trip to one end and back of this thing is enough material for a weekly blog, so how could anyone actually use it!?"

"Ugh. B-by the way, what exactly is a 'three-hull structure'?"

"It doesn't matter!! A girl isn't going to remove a piece of clothing for each question I answer, so anyone who wants to know can do a search on their own!!"

Kamijou's simple question was drowned out by Heivia's desperate shout.

Waltraute looked down on the boys with a look of pity as she asked a question.

"You make this much noise just moving across a ship's deck? How do you normally walk around?"

"This ship is as big as a city! And I don't want to hear anything from someone who has a horse to ride!!"

As college student Higashikawa Mamoru cried out shrilly, Nanajou Kyouichirou whispered to him.

“Is my brain a lost cause if the combination of a blonde girl and a horse seems dirty to me?”

“If you wish to be reincarnated, just ask.”

The peerless and hopelessly incompatible Killer Queen’s comment was enough for him to decide to abandon his worldly thoughts.

After quite a bit of effort, they all arrived at the edge of the divine ship. Kamijou peered straight down from the railing-less edge and found they were six or seven stories up. It was taller than a school rooftop and more than enough to fill his legs with a tremor, but given the overall size of the ship, it was relatively “thin”.

There was no device to lower them to the ground in a magic beam of light like someone being abducted by foo fighters. Instead, a normal gangway was folded up on the side. The idea of being six or seven stories up returned to their minds with a vengeance.

“This isn’t some new diet where we have to lose a certain amount of weight before we can get back on, is it?”

“That would certainly be a problem. Youkai can’t lose or gain weight, so I’d be stuck in an infinite loop.”

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata sounded annoyed, but the Yuki Onna let out a delighted screech as she slid down the stairs on Jinnai Shinobu’s ice coffin. It looked like the kind of reckless mountain festival where people slid down a steep hill on a log.

“Damn. If the entire ship wasn’t made of wood, I could use magnetism to take a shortcut.”

Mikoto sounded like she was cursing someone, but she still managed to reach the sandy beach below.

The ocean! The beach!! The sun!! While we’re at it, let’s all change into swimsuits!!!!! …was not how things went here. Excluding the Youkai who had never-ending stamina, they all collapsed from exhaustion. If they had been thrown out into the ocean, they might very well have passed out and drowned.

Index asked a question while watching the Baby Magnum jump down to the beach in the distance and send a wall of sand flying in their direction.

“I-I’m absolutely starving. What do we do now? What are we going to do- wah!?”

The sandstorm brought visibility down to zero and they could only hear Waltraute’s calm voice.

“There is a lot that needs doing, but most importantly, I assume you miss human civilization. I recommend heading to the human world of Midgard.”

“Cough, cough.”

Mikoto coughed and used magnetism and static electricity to remove the sand from her hair and clothes.

“The human world? Midgard? What’s that?”

“Midgard is Midgard. That is the world at the base of the World Tree Yggdrasil where the humans live.”

Waltraute made it sound obvious, but Quenser and Heivia began whispering between themselves.

“(What do you think? That sounds like the kind of place where we could find a weapons shop and item shop. But I get the feeling this isn’t ‘our world’ where Frolaytia and the Oh Ho Ho are waging war year-round.)”

“(I don’t care as long as it comes from a beautiful woman. If some filthy guy started talking about this crazy spiritual crap you’d hear from the Faith Organization, I’d clock him right on the nose and ask him to explain it for real.)”

Meanwhile, Mikoto continued questioning Waltraute.

“The human world? So are you going to make us walk some more?”

“You can stay here if you want, but this land is classified as the giant world of Jötunheimr. There are a number of different types of giants, but they are generally the enemies of the gods and mankind. You are free to camp out here, but then it’s your own fault if they step on you or gather you for food.”

The bunny girl gave a light groan and Higashikawa Mamoru looked up at the gangway they had descended.

“If it’s that dangerous, why’d we even leave the boat? It sounds like we were safer in there.”

“You can do that as well. As long as I know where all of you strangers are, you can do as you wish. However, I will stay with any of you who continue to Midgard, whether that is all of you or just one. By the way, Skíðblaðni currently has no food aboard that is not a trap. You will need to gather fresh water and food in a hurry, but if you have a way of acquiring that from seawater, be my guest.”

There was nothing they could do.

The optimistic idea of catching fish with a fishing pole or fishing net flashed through their minds, but the fresh water was a lost cause. They doubted a filter made from pebbles and sand would be enough to remove all of the salt from the seawater.

And so Waltraute was still able to decide what they did. They had come to the beach yet none of the girls changed into swimsuits and they got sand in their clothes yet none of the girls decided to bathe in the ocean. At any rate, Index, the Zashiki Warashi, the bunny girl, and the others took their first step into the green field.

However…

♦

"H-hey."

Kamijou called out while collapsed face down.

Mikoto responded while gasping for breath with her butt flat on the ground.

"Wh-what?"

"How many days has it been now?"

"I don't know. Three or four I think."

He had been the one to ask, but Kamijou grew enraged at this unreasonable world when he heard the actual number.

"Oh, honestly!! Why!? Just why!? We were talking like it was a quick trip to the next town over, but we've been walking forever! And isn't a single incident supposed to begin in the morning and end that night!? There's something wrong when we've spent four days on travel alone!!"

"This must be a special occasion, Touma."

Index said something, but he could not hear it over some strange static.

Higashikawa Mamoru stared into the distance where the Baby Magnum waited.

"Let me guess, there's some reason why we can't all just ride that thing."

"That two-hundred thousand ton mass is floating with static electricity. If a flesh-and-blood human got close, he'd be blown to pieces," explained Quenser. "Climbing up onto one of the main cannons like before is a different matter, but are you sure? That thing moves around at five hundred kph. If our Princess sneezed at the wrong time and pushed a lever, we could all be knocked off."

The only ones with any energy left were the Zashiki Warashi and Yuki Onna, because they were Youkai, and the Princess, because she rode the Baby Magnum. Quenser and Heivia were supposed to be soldiers, but they were completely out of breath and sitting down with their backs against the thick trunk of a tree.

“This is awful. Just awful. I’m going to lose weight if I keep walking around like this. If you polish up these world-class looks any more, it could easily start a new war, dammit.”

“Huh? Is this the kind of forced march that makes professional soldiers complain? No wonder it’s so tough for a cute bunny in stiletto heels like me.”

“Yeah, well we normally get back by nightfall. The Object takes care of the fighting, so we get paid tax money for just watching on from somewhere close by. Anyone but the monsters in the Northern European Restricted Zone would give up here.”

“You heard them. So carry me, Higashikawa!!”

“Stop. Don’t grab onto me. And since when do we get along? I thought we were trying to kill each other!”

As the party continued to complain, they decided to camp there for the day. However, they only had a fire below a large tree and did not even have any tents.

Meanwhile, Nanajou Kyouichirou muttered something while lying on his side with a dead look in his eyes.

“Isn’t a whole lot supposed to happen when you take a trip with girls in a fantasy world? Y’know what I mean. If you were to describe it as a smell, you would call it bittersweet!! After all, there are no baths or dividers here! If you want to get clean, you have bathe in a river or spring!! And everyone sleeps in a group with no division between boy and girl!! Can’t we have something like that!? Can’t we have something to look forward to about tomorrow!!!?”

“Kyouichirou, have your suicidal tendencies come back?”

“No!! I’m complaining because I want a better life!!”

The desperate boy’s tone of voice was falling apart by this point, but Anzai Kyousuke glanced over and cut in.

“No, you can’t have any of that. There’s nothing that great about a fantasy world. It’s all based on medieval Europe, right? The tenth century? Or maybe the fifteenth? And in England, France, or maybe Germany? Well, if you learned about the actual customs of the time, you wouldn’t want any of that.”

“Stop it, college boy. Don’t destroy a high schooler’s dreams!”

“After all.”

Anzai Kyousuke sniffed at his own sleeves.

“A realistic fantasy would be filled with pungent body od-…”

“Nhnnn!!!!!!”

He never finished his sentence because Waltraute kicked the stomach of her white horse and its hind legs sent a college student’s worth of mass flying into the sky.

The tremendous sound of destruction was both comical and substantial, but it was enough to silence the fool who was touching on the greatest of taboos.

Waltraute then spoke with a refreshed look on her face.

“Fantasy is fantasy, so it is fantastically odor free. Any smells in fantasy are fantastic aromas.”

“I-I see.”

“And as I am always riding a fantasy horse, I do not have a hint of fantasy animal smell on me. After all, this is fantasy. …Do you understand?”

“Yes!! Perfectly!!”

Nanajou Kyouichirou did not want to join the other fantasy boy who had become a new star in the sky, so he obeyed his survival instincts and expressed his agreement.

Satsuki looked at him like he was human trash, but she finally turned back toward Waltraute.

“How much further do we have to go?”

“We are about at the halfway point, so we will reach Midgard in another three days.”

Kamijou Touma groaned as he listened in.

Quenser called out while rubbing his calf.

“Hey, do you think there’s anything nice up ahead? Bathing in a spring? Happening across one of them changing? Having to warm our cold bodies through skin contact? Hell, if it means resting my head on their lap and getting fed mouth-to-mouth, I’m prepared to collapse from a light illness.”

“How should I know? If there is something, there’ll be an illustration for it. If you don’t see one, then I guess nothing happens.”

“Oh, hell! So I have to count on heaven to throw some luck my way? Well, you know what!? I believe with all my heart that there’s at least a leaf swimsuit in my future!!”

With that lament in his heart, they continued on to overcome the rest of their long, long journey.

Or they should have.

Instead…

Part 2

When night fell on the fifth day of trudging along, irreconcilable differences rose to the surface between Kamijou Touma, Index, Misaka Mikoto, Quenser Barbotage, Heivia Winchell, the Zashiki Warashi, the Yuki Onna, Anzai Kyousuke, Higashikawa Mamoru, the bunny girl, Nanajou Kyouichirou, and the Killer Queen as they gathered around a makeshift campfire.

The situation could be summed up as follows:

“What do you mean you’re cooking the apples!? Are you the kind of person that eats pineapple with sweet-and-sour pork!?” (Heivia)

“We don’t have a fridge here, so the apples are all warm! They’ll taste a lot better if we go all the way and cook them!!” (Misaka Mikoto)

This might seem like a trivial argument, but a lot had built up on the way here. Anyone would end up that way after being forced to walk for five days straight with sleeping on the grass or hard ground as their only rest.

“I don’t understand why anyone would want to cook fruit. Fruit goes with shaved ice or ice cream, so why are you turning in the exact opposite direction?” (Nanajou Kyouichirou)

“Jam and apple pies use cooked fruit! There’s also chocolate bananas, candied apricots, and tons of other examples!!” (Index)

“And I don’t think it’s all that rare to cook fruit as-is in Europe. In England, they cook melon and serve it with chicken.” (Zashiki Warashi)

“Wait! Don’t bring up southern British food! I might respect their music, museums, and beautiful women, but I can never accept their food!” (Quenser)

“Hey, hey, hey! If we’re gonna fight over it, do we really need the apples at all? They’re the dessert, not the main dish, so they don’t matter that much, right?” (Kamijou Touma)

♦

Meanwhile, an electronic chime filled the Baby Magnum’s cockpit.

The Princess shifted her hips in her seat to turn around, open the door to a microwave bolted to the wall, and pull out a cheeseburger.

When she opened the pull tab of a nicely chilled metal can, the carbonation quickly bubbled out due to vigorous movement of the Object. She brought her lips to the cold can just before the drink geysered out and drank it.

Once it settled down, she pressed the can against her forehead, took a bite from the cheeseburger poking out of the wrapping, and muttered to herself while chewing.

“So good.” (Princess)

♦

Soon, the world-saving heroes exploded.

One of the branches in the fire burst.

“Ahh, if only the murderer in charge of freezing was wandering around here.” (Killer Queen)

“…” (Frozen Jinnai Shinobu)

“Ah! Come to think of it, we’ve got a Yuki Onna!! We can get her to freeze the apples or make a sherbet or whatever we want.” (Anzai Kyousuke)

“Don’t be ridiculous. Do you really think I would use my power for anything other than Jinnai Shinobu’s happiness?” (Yuki Onna)

“Can’t we let the people who want apples eat them and leave it at that? I’m really not that interested in them.” (Kamijou Touma)

♦

In addition to the microwave, the Baby Magnum included a handheld game system and the kind of mini-fridge found in hospitals and hotels. An Object single-handedly supported one side of a war, so the condition of the Pilot Elite could have a dire effect on the battle.

So…

“Hmm. Why is there so much vanilla? I really feel like chocolate chip or mint today.” (Princess)

The Princess shoved aside the frozen foods blocking the way and observed the brand-name ice cream cups. Finally, she chose one and pulled out the small cup between her thumb and forefinger.

“Today’s dessert will be this limited-time-only cherry blossom ice cream.” (Princess)

♦

Next, Armageddon arrived.

“I’ve had enough!! I’ll never be able to get along with her! Come to think of it, I didn’t like her from the very beginning!!” (Higashikawa Mamoru)

“Oh, is that so? Well, that’s just perfect. You haven’t forgotten that causality has been twisted to the point that I’ve been resurrected, have you!? Don’t think that your Ever-Victorious Challenger is going to save you forever!!” (Bunny Girl)

“Wait, wait, wait!! Why are you two really trying to kill each other!? I-in that case, how about we divide up the apples and only cook half of them?” (Kamijou Touma)

“Take a side or shut up!!!!!” (Everyone Else)

♦

A Pilot Elite’s special suit was perfectly skintight, but it had a zipper running from the throat down to the navel.

Inside the Baby Magnum’s cockpit, the Princess pulled out a military item known as a wash towel. Simply put, it was a combination of an antibacterial wipe and a soothing powder soap.

Despite all the effort that went into its development, it was a fantastical item not issued to the normal soldiers. In the purely natural environment of a desert or jungle, a well-trained nose could pick up the scent of shaving gel from five hundred meters away and a military dog’s accuracy was even higher. Using soap or shampoo in those conditions could literally be a deadly mistake.

However, that was not a problem from inside armor powerful enough to withstand a nuke.

Because of all that, the wash towel was known in the military as a “handheld bath”, a “euro-note towel”, or an “officer’s luxury”.

It was not as nice as soaking in a proper bath, but being able to clean one's body had a great influence on their mental and physical condition.

The Princess also set her chair's massage feature to "low" and stuck a hand in her special suit to wipe away the sweat.

Meanwhile, she muttered to herself with a blank look in her eyes.

"Viva relaxation." (Princess)

♦

A tremendous roar filled the air.

Kamijou, Quenser, Anzai Kyousuke, Nanajou Kyouichirou, and the rest of the boys were knocked to the ground with their butts sticking into the air like human chairs.

"A-aren't the girls on the pro-cooked apples side a little too powerful?" (Heivia)

"The Railgun and Killer Queen are raising the average too much. A-and they also have those Youkai who can ignore any physical attacks." (Quenser)

"W-wait a second. Cough. Why are you throwing me in with them?" (Kamijou Touma)

For that matter, Shinobu had already been thoroughly silenced inside his ice coffin, but even he was flipped upside down and skewered into the ground.

Meanwhile, Misaka Mikoto stood tall and brushed the dust from her hands.

"That takes care of that." (Misaka Mikoto)

"We're going to take a bath, but make sure those apples are cooked by the time we're back." (Zashiki Warashi)

After receiving a beating like that, the world-saving heroes were searching for some cruel way to get their revenge.

At the same time, a god arrived on a white horse to check on them.

"What happened while I was gone? Is that bearded head god spreading war among the humans again?" (Waltraute)

"Hey, the caravan guys are right over there. We might be able to find some rare snacks!" (Boy)

However, the other boys were not about to let that peaceful topic calm their hearts.

“(That doesn’t matter!! What am I supposed to do about this anger boiling in my heart? How about we go peep on them as they bathe!?)” (Anzai Kyousuke)

“(No, wait! Wait, comrade!!)” (Quenser)

“(What? There’s no reason to start acting clever now!)” (Higashikawa Mamoru)

“(That isn’t what I meant. That ‘Kyah! Pervert! Zap, zap!’ would only last a moment, but we’d end up roasted black. We need to resist for now and secretly move onward!! We can’t go with the cliché! If we want our revenge, we need an absolute victory that has a permanent effect!!)” (Quenser)

“(What’s this, Quenser? Did you have another brilliant idea in the face of disaster!?)” (Heivia)

“(Just watch. First, let’s go visit that caravan. We might be able to start a revolution with their lineup.)” (Quenser)

“(Okay, let’s do this! This is our only chance to act and we have six world-saving main characters working together. That has to be enough to take at least one step outside the normal punchline!!)” (Nanajou Kyouichirou)

“(Eh!? Since when am I part of your group!?)” (Kamijou Touma)

With that, the losers from the anti-cooked apples group made their way to the caravan. It was made up of several large carriages pulled by four horses each. Based on what they could communicate through gestures, it seemed the caravan had just completed a large trade and was on the way back to the city, so they only had scraps of cloth and broken clasps left over. None of it was useful for anything more than kindling.

“We don’t have any money, so what are we supposed to do?” (Anzai Kyousuke)

“Sell the apples. They caused all this anyway.” (Heivia)

The boys completed the trade and acquired the scraps of cloth and broken clasps, but what were they to do with them?

It was Quenser Barbotage, technical mastermind, who answered that question.

“Hey, Heivia. It’s time we put our stealth skills to full use. We need to approach the bathing girls like we’re sneaking into an enemy Object’s maintenance base.” (Quenser)

“What? So after all that, we’re just going to peep?” (Heivia)

“No, we’re gonna hide their clothes.” (Quenser)

“You’re really taking it to the next level, aren’t you!?” (Nanajou Kyouichirou)

“But if we do, they’ll have no choice but to use the change of clothes we prepare for them. We may only have scraps of cloth and broken clasps here, but a little work can transform them into something nice. For example, we can make up for the fantasy that’s been so sorely lacking here by making bikini armor, a seashell swimsuit, or something along those lines!!” (Quenser)

A lightning-like effect ran through their surroundings.

The usual RPG Item Mixing event had arrived.

However, Kamijou Touma alone remained rational.

“Wait, wait, wait. We can’t do that! If we do, they really, really will kill us this time.” (Kamijou Touma)

“…” (Everyone Else)

“Huh? It’s just me? I’m the only one with any sense left!? Stop this! It’s definitely a bad idea! Biri Biri is gonna cook us at least medium rare!!” (Kamijou Touma)

However, the world-saving heroes used this pointless opportunity to join forces. With the intensity of the latter half of Chapter 4, they attacked the pointy-haired boy head-on and then got down to planning.

♦

Eventually, someone noticed something was wrong.

“Hm? Huh!? My uniform isn’t where I left it!” (Misaka Mikoto)

“My clothes are gone, too.” (Index)

“There weren’t any monkeys like at a hot spring, so I think we know exactly who did this.” (Zashiki Warashi)

They found some other clothes folded up not far away.

When they unfolded them, they found scraps of cloth that would fit right alongside the phrase “please do not touch the dancers”.

“Those boys!!” (Killer Queen)

As the killing specialist filled with rage, a male voice reached them from beyond a thicket.

“Hi, hi. You were getting upset with how dirty your clothes were, weren’t you? A caravan happened to be passing by, so we bought some new clothes for you. And this is a fantasy world, so apparently bikini armor and nude capes are perfectly normal here.” (Quenser)

“Quit playing dumb!!” (Misaka Mikoto)

“But we can’t exactly argue that it isn’t normal in this world. We haven’t seen a human village here yet.” (Yuki Onna)

“E-either way, this isn’t acceptable! We don’t have to follow the local rules, so we can just wear our original clothes.” (Index)

“Wow. I don’t know why, but today’s fire is really burning good.” (Heivia)

The girls’ faces grew entirely pale.

Even with the thicket blocking a direct view, the light of the fire was notably brighter than normal. A roaring campfire was nice, but what was it burning?

Hint: What is missing?

“Ahhh!! Did you burn our clothes!?” (Bunny Girl)

“I really feel like killing you right now, but I don’t want to head out like this either.” (Zashiki Warashi)

“Do we have to make a…small sacrifice here?” (Misaka Mikoto)

The girls spread out their prepared clothes on the ground once more and checked on their tragic composition.

It was a mystery how the boys had known, but they were sized perfectly. That gave them no choice but to wear what was prepared for them.

The situation was as follows:

Index → Equipped: Nude Cape (Blue)

Misaka Mikoto → Equipped: Bikini Armor (Red)

Zashiki Warashi → Equipped: Tropical Leaf Swimsuit (Green)

Yuki Onna → Equipped: Impish Bondage Bikini (Black)

Bunny Girl → Equipped: Bunny Suit (White)

Killer Queen → Equipped: Dancer (Gold)

After donning the clothing and blushing bright red at how ridiculous it all was, Misaka Mikoto sent bluish-white sparks scattering from her bangs.

“Okay, time to turn every last one of them to charcoal!!” (Misaka Mikoto)

“Wait. Why am I still in a bunny suit?” (Bunny Girl)

“Maybe they thought your outfit was perfect already and decided not to fix what wasn’t broken.” (Zashiki Warashi)

♦

After learning their revenge had been a success, Quenser Barbotage held his sides and beat the ground.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha!! Success! Success! Now this is feeling more like- dbgshah!?” (Quenser)

“I’m throwing!! Every single one of you!! Into that fire!!” (Misaka Mikoto)

“Wait, wait, Misaka-chan, wait! That wouldn’t just be medium rare! That would be a failed attempt at well done!! And besides, I stood in harm’s way to protect you from this!!” (Kamijou Touma)

“And can someone explain why I’m the only one with the unintelligent-looking warrior-type outfit!?” (Misaka Mikoto)

“Again, it wasn’t me! And if you look back at how you act on a daily basis, the best job for you is the o MP gorilla-type that-…no, wait!! Don’t throw me in the fire!!” (Kamijou Touma)

Incidentally, Index’s habit was known as the Walking Church and was one-of-a-kind, so it seemed like burning it would cause some problems down the road. However, it would all work out somehow or another. Distortions in causality and the timeline could accomplish anything.

Part 3

A lot happened, but the end arrived suddenly.

A white fence ran from the horizon on one side to the horizon on the other.

Instead of metal, it looked like it was made from really long fish bones.

“This is the border between worlds. The human world of Midgard lies on the other side, but…”

“Waltraute-san?” uneasily asked Kamijou Touma. “Why do you sound so hesitant?”

The goddess known as a warrior maiden glanced behind her as if faced with some dreadful sight.

“W-well, I am not trying to speak out against the behavior of strangers, but are you really going to approach a human village in those extremely inappropriate outfits?”

Ever since Index and the others had made use of the “Dress” command, Waltraute had used her frightening reaction speed to constantly keep the short boy behind her and the girls out of sight.

“Waltraute, I can’t see like this.”

“You don’t have to see!! Only the strangers need to see that. Honestly, I can’t believe this! No matter how much our techniques advance, I swear I will never visit a foreign world!!”

“See, Touma!? She just blew away your argument about these clothes! My 103,000 grimories were more than enough to tell there’s no logic behind them!!”

“I already told you!! I tried to stop them!!”

Index began hitting Kamijou, but it may have been a Pavlovian response by this point. In that case, was he indirectly responsible due to his actions in everyday life?

Heivia had hidden in the girl’s blind spot while shoving the blame on someone else, but he soon glanced around skeptically.

“I had been wondering what it would be, but it’s just a fence? There’s no huge gate or welcome parade?”

The delinquent soldier only mentioned that because he wished for that kind of warmth after several straight days of walking.

He could only pray that they would find some human warmth in the human world up ahead.

They then all crossed the fence and took their first step into Midgard.

Part 4

After being carried in on a forty-five kilometer warship, Kamijou had imagined any human city would be a futuristic place where everything was AI-controlled and cars whizzed by in clear tubes, but his assumptions were betrayed spectacularly.

The log houses were the fancier ones. Anything made of bricks or stone walls was for a king or feudal lord. It was not uncommon to see houses with roofs made from a dome of grassy dirt.

The stone-paved path was only built from the city entrance to the homes of the most influential. The rest of the paths were unpaved dirt ones.

Also, Index, the Zashiki Warashi, and the other girls were given confused looks by everyone there.

Even a king would give you a wooden stick and a cloth tunic, so why were these people walking around in a nude cape or tropical leaf swimsuit?

“See!? See, Touma!?”

“I-I really think you should try complaining to one of the others from time to time! You don’t have to work so hard to rehash the same joke, Index!!”

The nude cape attacked the uniform-wearing boy and some of the passersby seemed to mistake them for street performers because they handed over two walnuts and an apple.

The food calmed things down and Kamijou was able to escape Index’s fierce attacks, so he quickly resumed observing the human city.

“So this is a realistic fantasy world.”

“Stop it,” commented college student Anzai Kyousuke as he stared into the distance. “Do you want to end up like me, young one?”

Waltraute guided them to the city’s inn. It was the usual business seen in RPGs alongside the weapons shop, but it was apparently a fairly rare thing here. This was simply because a community that developed from a small-scale village society was not the type to accept outsiders.

Heivia gulped.

“They’re willing to happily accept a group of people dressed in bikini armor and a bunny suit? Is this the kind of place that ends up sheltering all sorts of criminals on the ru-gyabah!?”

His unnecessary comment earned him one of Mikoto's lightning spears to the butt.

Meanwhile, college student Anzai Kyousuke gave a fairly serious comment.

"But we have no idea if they'll understand our language, we don't know their religion, and we have no way of proving where we came from, so it really is lucky they're fine with us being here. I have no idea what would have happened if this actually was medieval Europe."

A community willing to accept strangers was strong.

After all, they were blessed with the possibility of absorbing foreign techniques and cultures.

Of course, this was only if they did not go too far and lose their own originality.

"This city is sure to become a kingdom one day," whispered Waltraute with all emotion and investment removed from her eyes.

At any rate, the inn was a two-story wooden building and it was cozy enough for Kamijou and the others to fill all of the rooms. The rooms themselves only had a single bed…or rather, a sort of wooden box with no springs. Not only was there no bathroom or shower, but there were no chairs or tables either. The guests were forced to get creative.

After checking his room and stepping back out into the hallway, Heivia gave an annoyed complaint.

"Wow! I think the grass might actually be more comfortable. Are they seriously making us pay for this?"

"Heh heh heh. Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh. Let's make an ice room of love together. Now I can be with you forever and ever. Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh."

"Crap, I chose the wrong person to talk to."

Not even Heivia could do anything about the obsessed yandere that did not even look his way. The Yuki Onna's voltage must have reached its peak because each breath she took sparkled like diamond dust.

On Waltraute's suggestion, Kamijou and the others gathered in the bar/restaurant on the first floor.

The pointy-haired boy forced down an unnecessary comment, but Nanajou Kyouichirou let it slip.

"This is one hell of a scene now that we're all together again. The skin all the girls are showing is- gugyah!?"

“Dbfh!? A-again! I held my tongue, so why are you attacking me too!?”

The lightning spears flying from the bikini armor and the powerful fist of the tropical leaf swimsuit caused quite a disaster.

They were more than exhausted, but they were still incredibly unsure about sleeping in what amounted to a wooden box.

“By the way! Can’t you at least let me use your shirt!?”

“Eh? A shirt over bikini armor? That’s just complete chaos. At first glance, you’d look like a pervert wearing nothing but a shirt, yet when people noticed the armor underneath, they’d still think- gogugyah!?”

Waltraute ignored the well-done roast and spoke.

“The Divine Ship Skíðblaðni is the warship of the gods and the primary enemies of the gods exist outside of Asgard. In other words, that ship is meant to carry the gods between the worlds.”

Even as she calmly gave her explanation, she used her own body to perfectly cover the short boy’s view.

“Mh,” said the boy hidden behind her. “Hey, hey. Waltraute.”

“Wh-what? If it is about not being able to see, I will not listen!”

“No, not that. Your butt has been pressing up against me for a while now.”

“Bfh!!!???”

While performing a spit-take, the Valkyrie corrected her distance from the boy.

For a Valkyrie, she seemed more like a worrier than warrior.

“Anyway, it is only meant to travel between the nine worlds supported by Yggdrasil, the world tree. It was not made to surpass the boundaries of Norse mythology. Nevertheless, you have been dragged here from beyond those boundaries.”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance and shrugged.

They seemed to have given up already, but Index urged Waltraute on.

“Then what?”

“Our entire world is supported by Yggdrasil, either by the branches or the roots.”

Waltraute pointed out the window where a giant tree could be seen rising toward the heavens. Its trunk looked large enough to fit a small village inside.

“If the branches and roots are forced to grow in a direction that ignores Euclidean geometry, they could likely create a ‘path’ connecting to a new world other than the nine worlds.”

“Hm. Come to think of it, the world tree does grow from the water of the well of wisdom.”

“Yes, just like the three Norns sprinkle the well’s water to make it grow while the Black Dragon Níðhöggr gnaws at the roots to make it wither. I still do not know the exact method, but my going theory is that the well’s water was used to influence the world tree’s growth so the branches or roots extended in otherwise impossible directions.”

“But that would definitely be unstable.”

“That is what Skíðblaðni is for. It powerfully absorbed you as you made your unstable passage between worlds and it prevented you from getting lost in the gap between worlds.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!!” cut in Mikoto. “You’re moving too fast! I’m still stuck back at the starting point!!”

Anzai Kyousuke had been pouring all of his strength into maintaining a look of comprehension, but that comment just about caused him to break down in tears. It may have been that people became adults once they stopped pushing themselves beyond their limits.

Index sighed before continuing.

“Basically, it works on the level of gods, so there’s nothing we can do.”

“Sorry. That was a little too blunt and now I’ve lost all hope.”

“But the truth is the truth. We may be divine ourselves, but it will take us some time to determine the details and find a way to return you all to your original worlds. Then again, I know someone who loves this kind of trickery, so it may be faster to beat it out of him than to investigate.”

Waltraute summed it up with the kind of argument that fit right in with all the fighting and pillaging of Norse mythology.

“So you can wait here until we have finished our investigation. I brought you here because I assumed you would prefer being with humans to camping.”

“What a pain.”

Despite Quenser's complaint, he felt great relief in his heart.

This was better than the errand-running quests that required conquering the continents one by one to gather the seven treasures needed to return home.

The bunny girl toyed with the end of her fake rabbit ear and spoke up.

"Then is there nothing for us to do?"

"No. In fact, moving around would only cause unneeded confusion, so I would prefer it if you stayed put," replied Waltraute. "So do what you want in the inn until you hear from me."

"Oh, so we just get to relax and-..."

"But of course, you will need to earn enough money to pay for your rooms and food."

...Hm?

Part 5

"This is bad! This is really bad!!"

Heivia sighed while sitting around in one of the restaurant's simple chairs.

"How is this bad, you ask? Cheerful Heivia here has been doing nothing but sigh since he got here. First we have to search a dungeon, then we have to march for days on end, and now we have to earn some money? Where are the silky blonde, long-eared elf girls or the mermaids with a harp in one hand? I'll even take a half-naked princess captured by a giant octopus."

The leaf swimsuit Zashiki Warashi sat directly on the round table instead of in a chair.

"Well, there's no real family register here and our identity isn't managed by a social security number, so finding a place to work shouldn't be too difficult. Of course, I certainly don't want to work."

"It doesn't sound like it's actually that easy," cut in Mikoto. "I asked the guy who runs the inn, but he won't even give us a job washing dishes or cleaning floors."

"Why not?" asked Quenser with a frown.

Mikoto shrugged.

“They only pass jobs down from father to son or from master to apprentice, so there’s nothing we can do without being in the bloodline or knowing someone in the area. This really did develop from a village society. Any outsiders won’t be able to buy anything and will just dry up.”

It was an impossible situation with any labor standards laws or employment equality laws, but an undeveloped culture was exactly this type of society that allowed these imperfections.

Higashikawa Mamoru groaned as he remembered the class on politics and economics he had taken just to fill up his schedule.

“Are you serious? So we have to get the village society to trust us before we can even begin searching for a job?”

“Hee hee hee. And if earning their trust requires a lot of gifts, we’re right back where we started.”

She was in just as much of a bind, but he bunny girl’s voice was inappropriately bright.

That was when Kamijou and Index entered the conversation.

They placed a few flyers on the table. Instead of paper, they were made from ink on something like animal skin.

“According to Index, these are the jobs outsiders like us can do.”

But Nanajou Kyouichirou grimaced.

“What’s this? These flyers look like you could summon a demon if you signed your name in blood. What do they say?”

“They’re based on runes, but the dialect or the details are quite unique. It uses the standard twenty-four futhark runes plus seven symbols I’ve never seen before. But from what I can tell…”

Index traced her slender pointer finger over the “magic writing” and revealed the help-wanted information.

“Go to the mountain and cut out some rocks. An average of thirteen tons a day!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 30%)

“Become a rower on a galley. Row a top-class warship and cross the ocean!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 80%)

“Make salt on the beach. On a white night, you can dry out the seawater all night long, too!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 50%)

“Travel to the freezing north. If you collapse on the way, that’s your grave!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 40%)

(*All units have been converted to modern values by Index)

Anzai Kyousuke tried to turn over the table like it was a tea table, but the Zashiki Warashi stopped him because she was sitting on it.

He decided to yell as a compromise and to vent his frustration.

“Hard labor!? And isn’t some of this the kind of social service work some eras and regions had criminals do!?”

“Hmm. That’s a village society for you. Assuming the undeveloped techniques and equipment of medieval Europe, all of these would just about kill you from overwork. Is this a new kind of formless murderer?” asked the Killer Queen while rubbing her temple with a finger. “And if this is the alternative, it might be more efficient and safer to search out a wanted poster for someone with a bounty on their head.”

“Um, wouldn’t that be a death game where outsiders hunt down other outsiders?”

Kamijou pointed out that problem just to be sure, but Quenser and Heivia began whispering to each other.

“With the Princess’s help, we could blow any wanted criminal to smithereens.”

“But who knows how many shells she has left. Not to mention we couldn’t get the bounty if they’re in smithereens. That monstrous weapon doesn’t have a ‘stun’ setting.”

However, they could not live in this city without earning enough money for the inn and food. And the city had developed enough that they would have difficulty living off of fish or fruit trees.

In fact, Waltraute had helped them with that during their long march, so it was unrealistic to expect them to continue supporting themselves out in the wild.

“Well, damn. So those were the only posters in the inn?”

Quenser sounded like he was setting their problem aside for the moment.

“I doubt we’ll find anything, but it may be better to search out some posters elsewhere. If we’re going to despair, how about waiting until we’ve searched the entire city for any proper help-wanted ads?”

There were no objections. Or rather, no one had the guts to choose anything with those death rates.

So without time to take a break, Kamijou and the others started to leave the inn.

“Wait a second! Touma, do I really have to walk around outside like this again!?”

“Don’t worry, Index. We all look strange to the people of this world.”

“Then how about we trade?”

“A guy in a nude cape!? Are you trying to summon depthless darkness into this world!?”

But they had no other option besides “remove all equipment”, so Index, Mikoto, and the other girls had to go along with it.

They made their way outside, but the situation took a turn at the first step out of the building.

“Mwah hah hah!! Strangers, you have the troubled look of someone who needs weapons to fight the powerful monsters around the village but lacks the money to visit the weapons shop. But there is always help somewhere!!”

A strange person suddenly called out to them.

The strange person was a tall woman of about twenty who had long silver ringlet curls, half white skin, and half pale bluish skin. Her outfit resembled a wedding dress, but it was as transparent as ice. That gave a full view of the bikini armor style outfit made of narrow chains, leather, and precious metal she wore below.

Kamijou turned toward the voice and briefly froze in place.

For one thing, this woman had not had any real reaction to Index’s nude cape or Satsuki’s dancer outfit, so she obviously fell under the category of “strange”.

Even Waltraute had been disturbed by those outfits.

When he added it all together, tears welled up in Kamijou Touma’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, everyone!! Something big is probably about to happen here. After all, a strange person – a female one no less – just appeared before normal high school boy Kamijou Touma!!!!!!”

“Don’t worry, boy. She’s around twenty, so you can’t call her a ‘beautiful girl’. That means this isn’t necessarily following the standard path, right?”

Quenser tried to soothe Kamijou, but Heivia muttered something ominous next to him.

“(You have to be kidding. As a soldier, anyone over twenty is usually really important. So is this following our world’s rules? Is some huge war between monstrous weapons about to begin?)”

However, the ice dress woman did not seem to care.

She placed her thumb and forefinger at a right angle to form a gun, pointed it at the group, and spoke.

“You’re trying to find work, aren’t you? That’s what people like me are for. I was waiting outside because the village society will kick me out too if I hang around an inn for strangers too much.”

“So are you an intermediary or middleman or something?”

“Correct, leaf swimsuit girl!! For one thing, a lot of people in the warrior or farmer classes can’t read the wanted posters. And forest witches like me need reading and writing jobs to make a living. It’s a give-and-take kind of thing, see?”

“Forest witch?”

Mikoto frowned and the strange woman meaninglessly placed her hands on her hips.

“I also work a bit as a minstrel, so I wear these really showy clothes. You can think of them as a stage costume. But really, I’m just afraid of getting chemicals on me, so I want something like a raincoat to cover me.”

This may have been a time before the invention of lab coats.

But more importantly, she had a legitimate reason!

“Uuh… I’m so glad to find someone like us,” muttered the middle school girl in bikini armor who was feeling faint.

Meanwhile, the strange woman or stage costume witch snapped her fingers.

“To be blunt, the only posters left there are the ones for people who want to work themselves to death. If you want to eat and sleep properly, I recommend getting some help from a specialist.”

Her white skin and bluish skin mixed together in a marble pattern while Kamijou and the others exchanged a quick glance.

“I feel like things are really starting to get moving, but what should we do? Should we go along with it?” (Nanajou)

“I’d rather not. This is clearly going to get us in trouble. And we don’t have the frog-faced doctor here, so I bet I’ll really die this time!! Actually, don’t I end up in the hospital way too often? At this point, I wouldn’t be surprised to find out my entire body has been gradually turned into a cyborg!” (Kamijou)

“But doesn’t this looks like a forced scenario? I bet if we choose ‘no’, we’ll be stuck in an eternal question loop.” (Heivia)

“Or if we refuse, we’ll shift away from the normal route and end up on an ‘everyone dies’ quest or an ‘aliens attack’ quest. That might sound crazy, but if this is a fully open world and not a linear scenario, that kind of Absurdity could easily happen.” (Higashikawa)

They were cautious, but they still overlooked something.

The ice dress witch clapped her hands twice and made an announcement.

“Boo, boo! Time’s up! Now you’re stuck with me!!”

“Oh, damn!! I let my guard down because a digital timer didn’t pop up!!”

Anzai Kyousuke tore at his hair, but it seemed there were no redos.

You only got one life. Unless you found a 1-up somewhere.

“Okay, okay. Leave it all to me. These are the jobs strangers like you can do!!”

The stage costume witch displayed some help-wanted information.

“Let’s carry some corpses!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 0%)

“Let’s bite into the world tree’s roots!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 0%)

“Let’s whip the sick and elderly!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 0%)

“Let’s gather the nails of the dead and build a giant boat!” (Average Weekly Death Rate: 0%)

(*All units have been converted to modern values by the stage costume witch)

“Hold iiii

Kamijou's shout and Mikoto's dull comment mixed together while Anzai Kyousuke said "I'm so glad I didn't bring Harumi with me" with an utterly dark look on his face.

Meanwhile, Quenser and Heivia spoke up.

"Hey, that one about gnawing on tree roots sounds familiar. Where have I heard that before?"

"Are you thinking about how the Island Nation used to force-feed the sap in tree roots to POWs? What a dreadful story."

"It's called gobou, Westerner."

As the tropical leaf swimsuit Zashiki Warashi gave a casual correction, the bunny girl and Satsuki muttered to each other.

"But if we exclude the corpse ones and the tree roots, doesn't that only leave one of them?"

"In a way, I think that one would be the hardest on us. We might end up with a lifetime of nightmares for just a little bit of money."

Meanwhile, the stage costume witch pouted her lips at having all of her options rejected.

"C'mon, what's this? I went out of my way to give you some jobs, but you keep complaining that they're not a good match? You make it sound like you have a choice in the matter."

"Next time, add a value for mental health. All of those will clearly wear down our SAN in no time."

"I only have one proper job left, but it would be really boring and just plain not worth doing. I can't make any guarantees about your SAN, though."

"I'm really afraid of what you would call a 'proper job' after happily introducing this lineup," said a dejected Index.

"Fine, but this is really the last thing I have," said the witch while raising her index finger.

"Gather dropped items along the road and at the bottom of a cliff." (Average Weekly Death Rate 90%)

"Merchants often want someone to gather the products that fell off of a carriage and the ones at the bottom of a cliff are hard for amateurs to reach. However, gathering up what someone else dropped is considered unmanly in Norse culture, so make sure no one sees you. Here, people don't dig up treasure; they fight a monster to take it."

The witch sounded reluctant, but Kamijou was finally on board with one of her ideas.

“That’s it! That’s great! There are no corpses involved, it won’t tear us apart mentally, it won’t cause anyone any trouble, and it’ll make someone happy. Yeah, this finally feels like a real job!!”

“Oh, really? Then I’ll give you a map of the road and you can do what you want. The client will directly pay you half the cost of whatever you find, so you don’t earn a thing if you don’t bring anything back.”

“(Hey, Quenser. Wouldn’t we make more if we just kept the stuff for ourselves?)”

“(I would avoid doing anything noticeable before we know how the laws work here. I don’t want to be burned at the stake.)”

With that, the party made their way out to a cliff-side road to earn their keep.

However…

“But…” began the leaf swimsuit Zashiki Warashi.

“Hm? What is it?” asked Mikoto.

“If it’s just gathering lost items, why was the average weekly death rate at 90%? (Not that it matters to a Youkai like me.)”

Part 6

A mechanical whirring rumbled through the forest.

What towered in front of Quenser and Heivia was a twenty meter military robot. It seemed to have been designed with snow or ice in mind because it was entirely translucent, its back contained what could be giant wings or snow crystals, and the elbows and knees were covered in extremely sharp spikes.

Something like a disembodied soul floated near its chest while emitting a bluish-white light and a male face crying out in hatred or rage could be seen on the surface.

“Dammit, this thing does not belong in a fantasy world!”

“See, I told you? The world is being as cruel as always!!”

Part 7

Kamijou heard continued gunfire as he ran through the trees of a forest.

The translucent robot struck back by firing a bluish-white beam of light toward the ground. Around twenty conifer trees were felled around the blast site and the dirt was torn from the ground and thrown into the air.

The supposed soldiers seemed not to care about keeping quiet because the shouts of those two idiots were echoing across the mountain slope and all the way to Kamijou.

“Dammit. I’ve only got five magazines left, but I’d rather hold onto the one missile I’ve got. How are you doing, Sir Knight!?”

“At a quick estimate, I’d say I have about ten kilos of Hand Axe. This is no time to hold back. If we need to, we can make more gunpowder out of piss!”

“Yeah, but try to use that in a weapon! You’ll end up blowing off a finger with your own piss!”

Their attempts at shooting the giant translucent robot did not seem to be going well.

To avoid being hit by a stray shot, Kamijou made sure he was never directly behind the machine and he hid behind a thick tree trunk for the time being.

Index stood next to him while using both hands to make absolutely sure the explosive blasts did not lift her cape too high.

“What is that thing?” asked the pointy-haired boy.

“I’ve never seen the design before, but since this world is based on Norse mythology and that seems to be a form of grudge or evil thoughts stored in its chest, I’d guess it’s a soldier of Niflheim. That would make it the soul of the sinners who obey Hel, queen of that icy world.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” muttered Mikoto who was hiding behind another tree nearby. “I’ll take care of it with this.”

Mikoto held an arcade coin in her hand.

“If you’re going to hold it in place, head forward. If not, get down and cover your head. Whatever the case, we need to lure it to the side.”

Suddenly, the translucent robot turned their way.

The bluish-white beam fired from the chest blew away the tree trunk Mikoto hid behind like it was made of paper.

“Are you serious!?”

Kamijou’s eyes opened wide, but something was not right.

Just before it hit, Nanajou Kyouichirou had tackled Mikoto out of the way. Countless sharp wood chips scattered at frightening speed and a few of them stabbed into Nanajou’s back, but strangely, he did not shed a single drop of blood.

Mikoto looked baffled.

“Wh-what?”

“Oh, this? Don’t worry. Whether a ten-ton truck runs straight into me or a grenade goes off right in front of my face, it will somehow miss my vitals and I’ll survive. *That’s just how the world is made.*”

“Oh? What a coincidence.”

Someone crushed some grass underfoot.

The translucent robot began to fire its next bluish-white beam, but Higashikawa Mamoru, supposedly a mere college student, stepped out in front of it.

“That sounds pretty familiar. So I’m not the only one *who comes out on top for some strange reason or another*?”

It was not an issue of what he did.

Just before the deadly beam was fired, the earth below the robot’s feet crumbled under its enormous weight. It lost its balance and the beam flew off in the wrong direction.

It was as if all forms of coincidence had taken his side.

The beam very nearly took out the bunny girl instead, but all she did was give a cheerful whistle from the branch she stood on.

“You’re as skillful as always, Ever-Victorious Challenger. Not that we developed it to be used like that.”

The sound of a swinging whip came from somewhere else.

It was the Killer Queen. That girl was a “mass of death” that controlled crushing deaths and she spun her body around as if to match the dancer’s outfit she wore. However, she did not hold a ribbon. Instead, ropes made of special military rubber intersected as they

attached to the tree branches and trunks and formed a deadly cage that produced massive pressure. Those loops wrapped around the giant robot's body, limbs, and neck before tightening with intense vice-like strength.

Something could be heard breaking inside the machine, but it did not end there.

The translucent robot pulled out the reinforced rubber – or rather, the trees it was attached to – and continued marching forward.

"Tch!"

Still on the ground, Mikoto placed the arcade coin on top of her thumb.

(Oh, honestly! Those moronic soldiers are in my line of fire! I can't get a clear shot from here!!)

She released electromagnetic waves to scan the surrounding terrain and conditions. She was searching for anything she could possibly use.

What she found was the Zashiki Warashi who had tried to escape to safety.

"Over there! Boom!!"

She did not hesitate to flick the coin at thrice the speed of sound. It whipped up a tremendous wind, knocked over the trees, and created a straight line of orange light.

The Zashiki Warashi looked surprised, but it was already too late.

With an incredible sound of impact, the Railgun struck the Zashiki Warashi *and ricocheted off of her*. The black-haired Youkai was unharmed and had enough sense leftover to hold her leaf swimsuit in place.

Meanwhile, the shot had bent at a sharp enough angle to accurately blow right through the giant translucent robot.

One of its legs was torn off at the base.

It collapsed and seemed to bend over, but it still did not stop moving.

"Dammit!!"

Nanajou Kyouichirou and Higashikawa Mamoru stood in front of Mikoto and Kamijou Touma held his right hand forward.

However…

A moment later, *a different railgun* flew in from outside the forest and annihilated an entire band of the terrain.

The destruction was on the scale of a dragon's intense breath. Not only was there nothing left, but a large enough strip of forest had been cleared to build an airport runway and the robot was so thoroughly smashed that it would be difficult to locate any wreckage.

More than ten people had been scattered around, but the shot had skillfully slipped in between all of those allies.

Kamijou fell onto his butt and heard a familiar voice.

"Hey!"

It was college student Anzai Kyousuke.

He must have created makeshift flags from tree branches and handkerchiefs because he was waving two of them around as a primitive form of signal.

"I asked that Object thing for some help. Was that okay?"

"I think we need to punch this guy."

Heivia's low voice signaled the continuation of the battle.

Part 8

"Oh, honestly."

Misaka Mikoto began complaining as soon as they returned to the run-down inn.

She, Index, and Satsuki were gathered in one of their rooms.

She twisted her hips around to check her back and it was obvious what she was trying to do.

"There are marks everywhere. …You can't just make a breastplate out of metal. I will admit they were pointlessly clever to put cloth on the inside."

"From the looks of it, the clasps aren't going to break or anything like that."

"Oh, is that so? Thanks. But can't we do something about these clothes?"

“I just hope we get some good news from the two who went out.”

Satsuki turned toward the window that’s curtain was tightly closed.

The girls had been forced into these outfits by a conspiracy thought up by the boys, but the girls’ reactions fell into two general categories: those who were incredibly embarrassed and those who did not particularly mind.

The latter category contained the bunny girl, whose outfit was not that different from what she wore before, and the Zashiki Warashi, whose expression had not changed in the slightest after the change from red yukata to tropical leaf swimsuit.

The Yuki Onna also fell under that category, but that had more to do with her having no interest in her surroundings. She was likely off somewhere embracing Jinnai Shinobu’s frozen form.

Before long, a knock came on the door.

Mikoto turned the knob and the aforementioned Zashiki Warashi and bunny girl entered.

“No luck,” immediately said the bunny girl while not seeming to care. “We couldn’t find any clothes we could get our hands on. The price is of course an issue, but they also have no mass-production infrastructure, so everything is custom made. Even if we ordered something now, it would take over a week before it was ready.”

“And when people’s clothes get old, they seem to take them apart and sew them back up. It may be a lot like the relationship between a kimono and kimono fabric. If we really want them to make clothes from scratch, we have to be prepared for a pretty large burden.”

In that case, it seemed like they could earn enough to live on with the skill Quenser, Heivia, and the other boys shown in making these clothes out of the junk they had gotten from a caravan, but it also seemed unlikely they could put those skills to any worthwhile use. The skills might be exactly the same, but a greasy stalker could not become a sexy spy who kept the world safe. Those idiots could only fight in an idiotic field.

“The world really works in a twisted way, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, Touma often puts a lot of wasted effort into things.”

The way Index did not even hesitate suggested that pointy-haired boy needed to enter the mystery-solving phase of removing these wrongful accusations.

The bored-looking Zashiki Warashi leaned against the wall and spoke.

“We may be lucky Shinobu wasn’t involved in that. He doesn’t often use the full scope of his devilish intelligence, but if he had, he could easily be cruel enough to hide a slit in the center what looked like a normal bikini.”

Regardless of all that, it was looking like they would have to continue their grand adventure in the outfits that prank had produced.

“Honestly, do you think we could make some better clothes if we stole theirs and tore them up for material?”

“But then we would look like a group of Amazon warriors ruling over a bunch of naked guys. I feel like that would be embarrassing enough.”

Part 9

“That is pretty common. If a dead soul was sealed inside ice armor, it must have been the vanguard of Hel, queen of the underworld.”

Kamijou and the others had somehow managed to earn enough for room and board. While eating breakfast the next morning, Waltraute stopped by to check on them and casually explained what they had run across (while still looking shocked at the skin the girls were showing).

“Norse mythology is all about battle, so the souls of skilled people are believed to become skilled warriors of the gods. Similarly, it is not unusual for Hel to try to obtain skilled souls to prepare her own army.”

Kamijou almost nodded, but he could not overlook one thing.

He tore off a piece of some unnecessarily hard bread and asked about it.

“Wait. What do you mean ‘similarly’? Is this Hel person not the only one that does that kind of forced recruiting?”

This fantasy space was not poisoned by technology and large-scale factories, but that did not mean the vegetables and cooking were all that delicious. It was far too irregular and the flavor was highly unrefined.

The Zashiki Warashi lived in an Intellectual Village where crops had been turned into an extremely high-quality brand-name product, so she was looking especially blue.

Naturally, Waltraute ignored that and continued.

“It would be more accurate to say Hel is copying what was originally exclusive to the gods. Our bearded head god is especially nasty. He causes wars in Midgard and claims it’s because he wants skilled souls.”

“You’re kidding. The only people I’d let fight over me are girls in swimsuits. Besides, I’ve already decided I want to die on top of a woman. I’m not getting killed for some bearded dude’s convenience.”

The queen of the underworld sounded scary, but the gods could not be trusted either. It was all so savage one had to wonder who the residents of this world were supposed to pray to.

“Well, it would not surprise me if Hel targeted the souls of strangers like you, but you will not be staying here long. If you return to your original worlds as soon as possible, you will not be caught in that catastrophe.”

“Have you found a way for us to go home?” asked Satsuki while poking her fork into what she was torn between calling a salad or a pile of weeds.

Waltraute placed a hand on one hip before answering.

“This kind of trickery is always the work of Loki, but he seems to have vanished. Of course, running is proof that he’s up to something. I should be able to find him within a few days and beat the snot out of him.”

As before, she intended to use her fists to get information out of the usual suspect instead of doing an actual investigation. The gods’ stance was quite simple.

The Zashiki Warashi sighed when she heard that.

“So should we assume we’ll be stuck here for at least a few more days?”

“Heh heh heh. It doesn’t matter to me. As long as I’m with him…”

The Yuki Onna was in full yandere mode as she laughed gloomily and shoved filleted fish into the surface of the ice near Jinnai Shinobu’s mouth. She would likely remain happy even if all of humanity were destroyed.

While pretending she could not see any of that, Mikoto voiced another worry.

“By the way, um, god? I don’t really get it, but should we assume your side will be aiming for us too now? I’d really prefer not to be attacked on two fronts at once.”

“Oh, no need to worry about that,” readily replied Waltraute.

Index gave a puzzled tilt of her head and the warrior maiden continued.

“Well, uh, the ‘higher ups’ have their own issues to deal with.”

Part 10

“…”

In Valhalla, the hall of the gods, someone sat silently on a throne with a face so thoroughly swollen one could only assume a bearded head god had placed a hornet’s nest over his head as a costume.

Part 11

Kamijou and the others did not need to worry about money for a while thinks to the scavenging job the day before, so they had no real reason to head out today. However, they had carelessly paid for everything up front, so they had no money left for the girls to buy clothes. Heivia’s sleazy “just as planned!!” look earned him a thorough roasting from the bikini armor’s lightning.

They only had to lie around their rooms until Waltraute found a way for them to return home (in an extremely violent fashion), but that naturally left one person all on their own.

Quenser glanced worriedly toward the inn’s entrance.

“I wonder if the princess is upset about this.”

“Not her!!”

Someone shouted in desperation and kicked Quenser to the floor. As the boy rolled through the inn, “she” stepped into the bar/restaurant portion of the inn.

It was the stage costume witch from the day before.

She waved around her hands which had a mix of white and bluish skin.

“Why!? Why!? I prepared all sorts of jobs for you, so why are you still in here!? Don’t you usually thoroughly check through any new feature you find!?”

“We’re not exactly looking for luxury here,” said Kamijou who was somewhat irritated with Norse culture’s lack of toothpicks. “And besides, aren’t you Hel, queen of the underwo-…”

“Cough, cough!!”

She tried to drown him out by coughing, but it was too late.

Kamijou was unable to hold back.

“There’s no way anyone could be tricked by this! You’re the only person who was introduced partway through!! And when there’s only one suspect, the answer is obvious once something happens!!”

“D-don’t be ridiculous!! You’ve passed by countless people in the city, you’ve spoken with the guy who runs the inn, and someone had to have paid you for what you found on the job yesterday, right!? There have been tons of people, so it wasn’t just me! Don’t gloss over everyone who isn’t a beautiful girl!!”

Index and the Zashiki Warashi exchanged a carefree glance.

“But…you know, right?”

“Yeah. When someone makes that stubborn of an appearance, there’s no way they’re a normal person. If a suspicious widow is holding a schedule in one hand during the early afternoon and says it’s about time to head out, you can’t accept that she’s just on her way to a limited time sale at the supermarket.”

The stage costume witch who was actually Hel, queen of the underworld, was utterly confused.

She was so distressed that the mix of white and bluish skin below her translucent dress changed its pattern and started looking like the suntan left by a school swimsuit.

“Y-you at least noticed the clues, right? You noticed the ghost armor and my dress were both translucent and icy, right? And that they point to Niflheim, the icy world of the dead!?”

The woman with a blue school swimsuit suntan yelled with bloodshot eyes.

“And the original jobs I gave you – carrying corpses, gnawing on the roots of the world tree, etc. – included ones related to Niflheim. I did it all properly, so you noticed, right? Right!? You looked through all those clues and arrived at the answer, right!?”

Hel was desperate for some small mental salvation, but the bunny girl (cruelly) replied with a beaming smile.

“Hm, I’m not sure. I don’t really understand it all, but I think that Waltraute person told us up front it was the work of Hel, queen of the underworld.”

“Ohhhhhhhhh!! You mean it wasn’t the instantaneous workings of a genius intellect!? Someone just spoiled it for youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!?”

Hel, queen of the underworld, fell to her hands and knees and began punching the floor. It seemed necessary to call her by her full title or else people would start calling her by the completely unrelated name of “school swimsuit woman”. That was just how much of her dignity and majesty she had lost.

Still on all fours, the queen let out a shout.

“But!! Since you took that shortcut, I have no choice but to get to the point, strangers! I can only call it reckless to have refused the opportunity to slowly level up!!”

“Queen, what can you do besides get us jobs to work on?”

Kamijou’s simple question must have hurt Hel because she answered with tears in her eyes.

“*If you insist on knowing, I can summon the Black Dragon Níðhöggr.*”

An explosive wind appeared out front.

The inn’s front entrance flew inwards like a shuriken and all the windows shattered. This was all caused by an intense downwash created by a something massive decelerating by striking the air near the ground. The nun’s nude cape blew dangerously high and the clasps to the Killer Queen’s dancer outfit were blown off. From inside, Kamijou and the others could not tell what was going on, but it was obvious to anyone outside. A two hundred meter dragon had flown down in front of the inn.

It looked like the entire entrance was filled by Níðhöggr’s gaping maw and Hel waved a hand around to give instructions while still on all fours.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!! I’m sure Waltraute or someone has told you the souls of skilled or rare humans make an excellent military force, so there’s no need to explain! Níðhöggr, crush their flesh shells until nothing remains!!”

The dragon’s reaction was swift.

Pitch black particles gathered in its gaping maw and intense pressure built up. When released all at once, the attack would contain enough firepower to rival the Baby Magnum and it was mercilessly aimed toward flesh-and-blood humans.

“Now, it’s time for the exciting climax where an RPG bought in DLC pieces would pop up a screen saying ‘To be continued in Vol. XX’! And when making this into a movie, make sure this part is really high quality! Kaboom!!”

Hel seemed overcome with emotion, but she had made a few mistakes.

First, Kamijou Touma's right hand contained Imagine Breaker, so he could negate most any magical attack by holding it forward.

Second, Níðhöggr's mouth was positioned on the inn's entrance and she was still on hands and knees between Kamijou and the entrance.

Third, Níðhöggr was overly obedient to her, so it prioritized its master's orders despite thinking that positioning was dangerous.

Those three points led to a certain conclusion.

"Ah."

The pitch black breath accurately struck Hel's kneeling butt and nothing else.

If someone swung a wooden spoon the length of a human spine toward someone's butt, it might have made a similar sound.

Imagine Breaker negated the raging pitch black torrent and Kamijou quickly swung his head aside to avoid a certain "projectile".

"Hbrrgbhealoghbrogbrogbrbfobfiwiefbjr!!!???"

Someone flew through the air while partially bent over and their head stabbed into the opposite wall.

Heivia reflexively turned around to look and saw only a round butt and legs sticking out of the wall with a long skirt spread around them like a giant flower.

"It's a manmade miracle," he commented.

Part 12

Removing the human rafflesia (that was also the queen of the underworld) from the wall proved difficult. She must have been caught on something because she would not come out no matter how hard they pulled. On top of that, she seemed embarrassed at having her butt sticking out in front of them because she braced herself with her arms to keep them from revealing her face. As they continued their attempts to rescue her, she finally used her slender legs to grab Kamijou Touma like a crab's pincers and attempted to drag him through to the other side of the wall.

Anzai Kyousuke summed it all up in a single shout.

"This is just scary!! It's like some carnivorous plant from the tropics!"

“This just shows how much she wants some ‘high-quality souls’. Honestly, why are gods always so Absurd?”

Regardless, Hel was outnumbered, so they grabbed her legs and pulled like a game of tug of war and she ultimately popped out of the wall like a giant turnip in a children’s picture book.

The sudden release sent them all tumbling to the floor and bliss filled Heivia’s face as the bikini armor and bunny suit lay in a pile with no division between gender. But a closer inspection showed his usual companion was lying on top of him, so he was forced to half-seriously attack the other boy.

The tropical leaf swimsuit Zashiki Warashi was the first to crawl out of the pile of people.

“So what are you planning to do now, queen of the underworld who is more frightening than sexy and has introduced that disturbing claw pincer to the world?”

“Mwa ha ha!!”

Hel scrambled to her feet and laughed loudly (and meaninglessly). She was likely getting desperate.

“True strangers visiting from outside the nine worlds supported by Yggdrasil are rare indeed, so the lovely queen of the underworld is of course going to take all these souls for herself!! It would be hard to find a reason to let you go. This is like running across a duralumin case full of cash in the woods. What? Take it to the police? Yes, yes. Thanks for the textbook answer!!”

She sat in a random chair and (still meaninglessly) crossed her legs. She seemed to want to mentally place herself above them to crush the embarrassment in her heart.

But Kamijou and the others did not follow.

Index rubbed a finger against her temple and spoke.

“Hmm… The cultural customs here are completely different from ours, so we might not be able to understand each other like this. I think we need to come to a better mutual understanding of each other first.”

“What?” asked Heivia. “You’re confusing me more than her. What exactly are you suggesting we do?”

The bunny girl smiled bitterly and gave a comment of her own.

“Surely you aren’t suggesting we read through a thick law book.”

“Now that you mention, it’s kind of amazing that Japan’s laws are gathered in a single book but no one really knows the details.”

Kamijou did not sound too interested in this, but the Zashiki Warashi pushed them in another direction.

“Morals, ethics, and role models. Every world and every era has ‘installation’ books with all of that simplified enough for a child to understand.”

“What kind of brainwashing books are those?”

“Fairy tales, picture books, and old stories. Those are all meant as lessons for children, you know?”

When they heard those words of a centuries old Youkai, Kamijou and Mikoto exchanged a glance.

It seemed worth a shot.

People often talked about living in a tolerant society, but discussions and negotiations worked best when both sides had an equivalent set of values. Of course, most people tried to change the other person instead of trying to understand them.

Kamijou made up his mind.

“Mrs. Hel!”

“I am a young bachelorette! Do I look like some old woman to you!? And what is it!?”

“You’re like a hidden boss in an RPG, so how am I supposed to know how old you are? And more importantly…”

“Don’t sidestep the issue like that! But what is it!?”

“Have you ever heard the story of Momotarou?”

♦

In truth, Kamijou did not remember all the details of Momotarou, but he remembered enough: a superhuman crawled out of a peach, tamed three beasts, attacked an island of oni, and made off with all their riches.

He was pretty sure it was a longer story than that since it was told in picture books and scrolls, but when he explained the main points, it took less than ten minutes.

However…

“Sob, sob. That Momotarou was such a wonderful guy. He was a real hero for conquering the outside world and creating his own kingdom. That’s what you call a true man! Wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Ehh!? You’re crying? I’ve never seen anyone cry over Momotarou before!”

Mikoto shouted in surprise, but Nanajou Kyouichirou did not sound delighted.

“Um, uh. I think there really is a discrepancy in our interpretation here and I heard a dangerous word mixed in there. Momotarou isn’t a story of war and conquest.”

Quenser and Heivia were the most taken aback of all.

“(Now I’m scared. What is with the Island Nation? They raise kids with that kind of story!? If they see exterminating an island of man-eating giants as a happy ending, I can see why they produce such frightening soldiers!!)”

“(We need to rethink some things. They’re known as a nation of technology, but it looks like they’re also focused on the kind of combat education needed to breed a fighting spirit!)”

The Zashiki Warashi, who had suggested the idea, and the Yuki Onna, who was still embracing Jinnai Shinobu’s frozen form, both shuddered as they were briefly reminded of reality.

“From ‘our’ point of view, that certainly isn’t a story we want children hearing. And it’s still a mystery what exactly Momotarou was.”

“He was a horrifying mutation. In all seriousness, ‘we’ could all be wiped out if five of him appeared in the world.”

However, it seemed to have been more effective than they had thought.

Hel grabbed Kamijou’s collar and shook him back and forth whiles shouting at him.

“Do you have any more!? I thought your clothes were weird, but if I’d known you were a group of minstrels, I would have given you a warmer welcome! Anyway, tell me more about your world!!”

“W-wait! My neck!? I’m gonna die!”

Whether liked or disliked, Kamijou was about to be taken to the underworld, but he was released at the last second.

After waiting to recover from Status Effect: Confusion, he coughed and tried to continue speaking.

♦

“Princess Kaguya is about…”

“What? Who cares if you had to leave!! I bet the old man and woman wanted to go with you, so you should have just married for life, Princess Kaguyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

♦

“Urashima Tarou is about…”

“Ohhhhhhh!! After all that, it’s a story of tragic love!? And when Otohime’s going on the attack like that, you need to take her up on her offer, Urashima Tarou!! How could you want to head back to the surface then? What are you, a dense protagonist!?”

♦

There were some definite discrepancies in interpretation here and there, but Hel no longer seemed impossible to understand. It felt like they were gradually seeing where her heartstrings lay.

She seemed to like it when a protagonist fought and won.

She seemed to find it sad when people were forced to part ways.

She seemed to want romance that was ultimately fulfilled.

Despite her frightening title, she seemed to have the same emotions as a normal human being.

At that point, Quenser and Heivia began whispering to each other again.

“(If this is enough to get her crying, what would happen if we gave her a Shakespeare story?)”

“(Wait, wait. That would require a lot of background knowledge, so she might just be confused. How about A Dog of Flanders? I’m not really sure what kids are supposed to learn from it, but no story has more despair.)”

“Hey, you two. I see those looks on your face, so no playing around when we’re about to get this settled.”

Mikoto put a stop to the boys’ plans, but their goal was to keep Hel from acting violently and a fairy tale related to life and death might not be all that bad an idea.

“Hey, hey,” spoke up Mikoto. “Have you heard of the Little Match Girl?”

“And you say the look on our faces was bad!? I’d say a girl freezing to death is far heavier than what we were thinking of!!”

Hel had tearfully latched onto Momotarou and Princess Kaguya, so what would happen with the Little Match Girl who had no great reversal thanks to a super hero or magic?

The group watched on half in interest and half in fear.

♦

“What? She didn’t work hard enough to survive, so of course she died.”

An aura of confusion filled every inch of the inn.

The tears and snot covering Hel’s face vanished almost immediately.

“Wait, wait, wait!!” Kamijou cut in to check on something. “That was…how should I put it? You don’t get it? It’s a stereotypical tragedy and it teaches people to try to reach out and help someone they see in trouble so they won’t die like the little match girl did.”

“What are you talking about? She only died as a match-seller because she only sat there and continued selling matches. Not only did she not work to break out of her predicament, but she’s supposed to force that effort onto someone else? That’s not leaning on each other for support; that’s one side leaning on the other and crushing them.”

They seemed to have found the root of the discrepancies, so Kamijou thought for a moment and presented a different litmus test.

“You didn’t seem to like that one, so let’s talk about something else.”

“Oh, that sounds great! I want to hear about a dragon slaying!! Or about an intense fight between muscular macho men!!”

“Sorry, but there are no dragons or macho men here. It’s called The Little Mermaid.”

……

“What? She let some other woman steal the love of her life and then went to die on her own? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

Kamijou, Quenser, and the others knew they had found it, but Hel had not noticed the discrepancy and continued talking.

“I mean, love is the simplest basis for conflict. If you fall in love with a guy, you have to slaughter the competition and take him for yourself! You can’t speak? You have fish legs? Who cares!! If you love the prince, then get him by any means necessary! Is that all your love was worth, Little Mermaid!? Hmph!!”

“A lot is starting to make sense,” said the Killer Queen while choosing her words carefully.

The queen of the underworld did not beautify human death no matter what form it took.

She especially hated anyone who avoided conflict and chose their own death.

That kept her from accepting a story that ended in tragedy. She would angrily proclaim that the protagonist should have killed one of the other characters to win a happy ending.

It made sense at first glance, but something about her reasoning was twisted. That may have come from how she looked down on the dead as the losers. There was no special category for victimhood or self-sacrifice and she threw all the dead under the category of “loser”.

But was this thinking unique to Hel?

Or was it shared by all the people of this Norse world?

“Besides, it’s wrong to say the afterlife is full of pain and hardship.” Hel sounded thoroughly annoyed. “Even Niflheim has the ice palace Éljúðnir. That’s my house, by the way. Any usable souls are invited to that hall and received as guests. Light God Baldr is probably hanging around there somewhere and you’ll be given a guest room depending on your ability once you’re dragged down there. The humans in Niflheim don’t undergo eternal suffering because I’m cruel. That show of cruelty only happens because all of the sinners who end up there are too useless to be my guests.” Hel sighed. “And there’s really no helping it since I only get the leftovers after Odin takes all of the decent souls.”

“The sinners can’t be your guests? And what do you mean by useless?”

Kamijou sounded skeptical and Hel waved a hand in front of her face.

“Useless as far as Ragnarök is concerned. I don’t know what basis you all use to divide heaven from the underworld, but those are the rules here. The powerful and courageous warriors who die in a blaze of glory or the witches supported by magic are deemed ‘useful’ and that idiot Odin recruits them and takes them to heaven. That leaves me with the souls of the sick, the elderly, and anyone else who died without fighting. There’s just no way I can win Ragnarök with a group like that,” she complained. “Anyway, Odin who has become something like an obsessive gamer hasn’t called dibs on you all, so you can see why someone like me would really want you as a part of my army. Of course, I say army, but a battle of the gods comes down to the radiance of individual souls and a

single hero or god of war can easily influence the entire battle. Maybe you can think of it like the galactic alliance fleet stealing a dozen of the enemy's new ace fighters."

Despite her explanation, one thing did not sit well with Kamijou and the others.

In fact, it only filled them with more questions.

Kamijou asked about one fundamental issue.

"Wait. Wait just a second. You claim to be Hel, queen of the underworld, so that means you're a lot like Satan, king of the demons, or Enma, lord of hell, right? Sorry about only knowing this stuff from RPGs."

"Well… Since it sounds cooler, I would recommend calling me the one who rules over evil rather than the incarnation of evil. But either way, it isn't wrong to view me as the queen who rules over the depths of the earth where sinners' souls arrive."

"There, that's it. Call it hell or the underworld, but you say that's where sinners go, right?"

"Generally, yes. But sometimes, when the spirit of a female medium grows too powerful, her soul will end up living down there. Supposedly they bring disorder to the patriarchal Norse society."

"Then why are there all sorts of sick or elderly people's souls there?"

His image of the underworld did not fit.

He could not figure out why the depths of the earth would contain a child who tried his best to live but could not take a step out of bed or an old man who had worked hard and saved all sorts of people.

If the underworld was what Kamijou, Quenser, and the others were imagining, those people would be suffering there regardless.

If those people ended up the victims of sinners, it was unreasonable, but they could still imagine it.

But if those people were considered sinners themselves and treated like the perpetrators, it was too unreasonable to even imagine.

"Eh? But…"

However, Hel looked utterly confused.

She had the same look as someone who was told, in all seriousness, that it made no sense for the sun not to fall from the sky.

Without a second's lag, she replied.

"*Society will never forgive the great crime of living an entire life without killing a single person.*"

……

Silence fell.

This was to be expected of the supposedly "normal" high school boys Kamijou Touma and Nanajou Kyouichirou, but it included even the Killer Queen who fought with murderers for a living, the bunny girl who had cast aside her morals for world peace, the Zashiki Warashi who looked in on human society from outside, and Quenser and Heivia who waged war year-round. All of them completely forgot to breath or think for a bit.

Hel alone spoke smoothly as if ruling that stopped moment of time.

"Hm? Was there something wrong with what I said? If you die without taking part in human wars… No, no, if you die without taking part in the preliminary practice for the war of the gods…. No, no, no… Well, anyway. Anyone who can't help kill is sent straight to the underworld."

If she had spoken those words with great malice, they might have been able to accept it even if they could not understand it.

That would mean Hel was the end result of swallowing up human tragedy and misfortune and she distorted the paths of humans who tried to live a proper life despite it all. It would be normal not to understand that.

But that was not the case here.

Hel's expression and tone of voice were no different from someone speaking with the classmate at the neighboring desk.

And those rules did not just apply to the residents of the underworld. They applied to all the humans and gods in this world.

She had not created that unreasonable system on her own.

It was just how the world worked and even those who called themselves gods did not question it.

"Well, to put it simply, you're sent to heaven or the underworld based on your ranking. The stronger you are, the more people you've defeated, and the more you've killed, the higher up on the list you are. Only the people on the upper end of the list get to go to Asgard and everyone else is sent down to the underworld. It's obvious what happens to

the sick and elderly who couldn't build up their score, right? *If you don't kill a bunch of people, you don't get a happy life in heaven*. Honestly, what a troublesome system."

"Wh-what…the hell?" groaned Heivia.

Even a soldier covered in firearms was very nearly swallowed up by this.

"I know I'm the last person to speak out against this. I really do. But this is messed up. Isn't it normally the exact opposite? Doesn't the *afterlife* usually work by saving the people who were killed instead of the ones who did the killing!?"

"Take that up with the bearded head god who made up the rules. He's terrified of the prophecy, so he's been that way ever since he learned he'd be eaten by Fenrir during Ragnarök. To him, 'good' people are heroes who can kill lots of people and 'evil' people are pacifists who can't."

"Don't you think it's wrong to go along with that?" muttered Misaka Mikoto in a daze. "I mean, what's this Ragnarök thing anyway? What are you fighting for? It isn't to win. That's only the means. What are you trying to gain by fighting and defeating people!? Is it to protect? If so, then this underworld or whatever is throwing the ones needing protection in cages and making them suffer! That's just plain wrong!!"

"Eh? Fighting to protect? What's that?"

The girl had thrown everything she could into her yell, but it was deflected all too easily by confusion.

"Whether we win or lose Ragnarök and whichever army comes out on top, the world is still going to be destroyed. That's how it's set up. That idiot Odin doesn't want to be the world's protector or savior. He just doesn't want to be eaten, so he's using the entire world to make sure he alone can survive Ragnarök. That's all it is."

"What…?"

"The prophecy says we, the gods, and the humans will all be killed during Ragnarök. However, Light God Baldr and his brother Höðr will be resurrected from the rubble and create a new world and new humanity from scratch. So in the very, very end, the gods will cover the entirety of the new world. That is why winning the war is considered the true meaning of Ragnarök."

Hel waved her index finger while still sitting.

"So those of us who will be left out want to change that ending. Only one or two have to appear in the end, but if one of them is someone from the underworld, we can cover the entirety of the new world. In a brand new world without any selfish gods, we can create our own paradise without anyone getting in our way."

The gods and their enemies were never thinking about protecting the world or conquering the world.

It was all set to be destroyed. It would be such a great catastrophe that they were calculating out what they would gain after it was all destroyed.

In that case, what remained for the humans of this world who were caught in the middle?

They did not have the power to overcome a catastrophe that could destroy an entire planet and they could not pray to the gods because those gods wanted to see the world's destruction. Yet they could not start worshipping the enemies of the gods instead because those enemies also hoped for the world's destruction.

There was no rest for the people of this world. All it had was a giant eggshell.

The world was meant to be broken open from within so something could crawl out.

It was a paradise warmed by a hen and raised to meet its own doom.

"That's just wrong," muttered Kamijou.

"Hm?"

Hel slowly turned her head around and the pointy-haired boy continued.

"If there really are gods, the world is probably made for their convenience. And if people show up and claim to be enemies of the gods, that very thought is probably all under the gods' control."

But…

"If the enemies uses that thought to fight the gods and win, what's left for them?"

However…

"Whether the gods win or their enemies win, nothing changes. Even if you create a paradise unopposed, that paradise is only for you who had no problem with making the sick and elderly suffer. How is it any different from the paradise created by some combat-obsessed god? So what are you really fighting for? If the next world is the same no matter who wins or loses, then it's all about the gods from the beginning to the end."

"True," replied Hel while still sounding completely carefree. "But the winners get to choose how the world works. The only people at the two great peaks of the nine worlds think that way. It may be a lot of trouble for everyone else to go along with it, but you expect people to hate you when you're the queen of the underworld. I'd say the arrogant bearded god who is worshipped despite spreading fear and slaughter is far more evil."

There was no stopping it.

Kamijou and the others would leave here after only a short stay. After that, the people of this world would obey its rules and the world's shell would be broken.

Like a bad dream, they would soon be thrown out of it.

Or…

"Then what are the people who live here supposed to do?"

"That's simple." Hel smiled. "Either let themselves be killed or kill those of us at the top."

Part 13

Hel, queen of the underworld, left the inn.

She could have gone for another round, but she decided to call it a day since the Black Dragon Níðhöggr was wagging its tail around as if saying, "Can I get them? Let's get them, boss!!" Even the true queen of Niflheim would not be able to bear becoming a wall rafflesia twice in one day. The only person who could endure that would be Light God Baldr whose invincible body could deflect any attack. (And Index and Mikoto needed to perform some maintenance on their clothes before they were entirely destroyed.)

The sight of an ice queen sitting on a black wyvern was exactly the sort of thing some teenager might draw, so the images in the human heart may not have changed much since the days of the myths.

However, voices reached that queen just as she was about to fly away.

"Ehhh!? But salmon sandwiches would definitely be the best!"

"Do not be ridiculous. Meatballs are the undisputed champion."

She turned toward the arguing voices and saw a short boy clinging to Waltraute's waist and arguing with a four meter giant.

That giant was Surtr who supposedly led a great army that would destroy the world alongside Hel.

"What are you doing in Midgard!?"

"I could ask you the very same question."

“And where’s your fire sword!?”

“Oh, I threw that away *due to certain circumstances*.”

Hel felt faint when she heard the giant nonchalantly deny his very reason for existence.

The boy standing between Demon King Surtr and Hel, queen of the underworld, (a hopeless position on a mythological level) did not seem to feel any danger whatsoever.

“We’re talking about what’s the best food to go with rice. Hel, you think it’s salmon sandwiches too, right!?”

“I will admit salmon is delicious, but it doesn’t exactly go with rice when made into sandwiches, does it? Small meatballs are the best and you cannot convince me otherwise. But they have to be small! When they’re made to fit inside a lunchbox, they feel so luxurious, don’t they!?”

“Salmon sandwiches can to go with rice.”

“Nh. Don’t tell me you’re like those takoyaki fundamentalists!”

Hel had initially been too shocked to say anything, but something about it had irritated her for some reason.

Specifically, why had they not mentioned the true best option?

“Wait! Isn’t this when you’re supposed to go with fries!? You can eat them as-is, you can share them with all your friends, and you can trade them for something else, so there’s nothing to complain about!! Fries are the best when hanging out. It’s so simple, so why don’t you get it!?”

Hel suddenly vented her frustrations, but…

“Ehhh?”

“Fries? Are you serious?”

Hel grew enraged at the boy and giant’s low-key reactions.

“What!? Aren’t you supposed to be trembling in awe at my amazing choice!?”

“Um, Hel. You clearly don’t understand how boxed lunches work. Fries are good when they’re just cooked, but what happens when you leave them in a lunchbox for a while? Everything good about them vanishes.”

“Croquettes are the same. They’re no good once they aren’t crispy anymore. We’re talking about boxed lunches here.”

“Eh? Th-that isn’t true. It’s not the fries’ fault! It’s because you put them in the same box as moist things like… Yes, like fish and meatballs!! They wouldn’t lose their crispiness if you didn’t trap them inside with all that moisture! If you don’t use too much oil and divide up the contents of the lunch, they’d be just fine!!”

“You can’t get rid of salmon for some potatoes.”

“Throwing out the meatballs is a blasphemy against the world itself.”

Hel’s lips began trembling.

“You just don’t understaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnd!!”

Níðhöggr flapped its wings and Hel flew swiftly away.

The boy waved below.

“Oh, you’re leaving already? Bye bye, Hel!”

“I’m never coming back!! Never again!! Stupid, stupid!!”

The shock of having her fries rejected had left Hel half in tears as she flew across Midgard with Níðhöggr. The queen soon returned to Niflheim, that white and hopeless land at the end of the nine worlds where the light of the sun never reached.

It was entirely covered in ice and snow.

No matter how much one dug, they would never find any water or food. They could only experience the pain of the afterlife as the cold wind tore at their soft skin.

And none of this was penance for anything they had done. No matter how much work they completed, their soul would not be cleansed.

The system simply said anyone who ended up down there would suffer eternally.

The truck-sized guard dog Garmr came out to meet Hel.

“Oh, sorry about the wait, Garmr. You did well looking after the place while I was out.”

She raised a hand and Garmr lowered its giant head so she could pat it.

“There, there.”

While taming the guard dog, she glanced to the side.

Beyond the white screen of blowing snow, humans with scraps of cloth wrapped around themselves were walking in a line through the snow. Their arms and legs were bound by chains that linked them to the person in front of and behind them.

Their ages and sexes were a complete mix, but if they were here in Niflheim, they had a single point in common.

They had not committed any kind of crime or sin.

Odin, the head god who ruled the world, had simply considered them unnecessary and closed the gates of Asgard to them.

That was all that had sent them to Niflheim, where they would be forever tortured with no chance of salvation.

“More of them have shown up again. Looks like some died of starvation in addition to disease and old age.”

As Hel muttered that, Níðhöggr rubbed its giant head up against her as if saying “That doesn’t matter, so pat me too!! Reward me for putting up with this cold!!” Before long, a fierce fight broke out with Garmr over who got her attention.

As she patted both their heads with a bitter smile, she felt a prickling sensation in the back of her mind.

It was like a tiny thorn, so she barely even noticed it.

It was nothing but a small story from those strangers.

“…”

But that thorn was certainly there.

She was not aware that this throbbing would remain even after overcoming the pain in her heart.

Or that this tiny thorn…no, this tiny wedge was powerful enough to very nearly clog up some truly giant gears.

Before long, the world would change.

CHAPTER 3

[Series Introduction 4]

The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village

Youkai can be found living in the ultra high-quality brand-name rural towns known as Intellectual Villages. However, criminal Packages are built to incorporate and abuse their natural abilities. Solve the mystery of the Package and attack the true villain!

第二章

【シリーズ紹介その4】
インテリビレッジの座敷童

超高級ブランド田舎、インテリビレッジには当たり前って顔で妖怪達が暮らしている。ただ、その性質を組み込み、悪用した犯罪装置パッケージも猛威を振るって……。パッケージの謎を解き明かし、黒幕に一撃入れろ!

Part 1

Come to think of it, whatever happened to Jinnai Shinobu, protagonist of The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village?

“Tah dah!!”

With a bizarre shout, the high school boy with blond-dyed hair rose to his feet with the force of a bear trap.

“Sorry about the wait, everyone! Jinnai Shinobu☆is back!!”

After shouting as indiscriminately as a bullet hell game, he gave his surroundings a confused look.

The ground was made of some unknown translucent material (if anything, it looked like extremely smooth glass), the massive area was supported by the branches of a giant tree, and the city positioned on top was so streamlined and futuristic it made one think the people were planning to move to Mars.

Jinnai Shinobu muttered to himself as he stared blankly at a distant structure that looked a lot like a space elevator.

“This is insane. How many floors tall is that thing?”

“The great hall *alone* supposedly has 540 rooms and I think it’s easily over one thousand stories. That’s the mansion of Thunder God Thor, the son of that idiot. Can you believe it? That muscular guy might be able to manage, but you’d normally starve to death in your own home with that. Losing Light God Baldr really was a major loss. He was a good son who never said anything stupid.”

A female voice suddenly answered Shinobu from behind.

Shocked, he turned around and found a crouching woman with long blonde twintails and loose white clothing. Her dress was so loose that her posture could not only give a glimpse of her breasts but leave them fully exposed.

And Jinnai Shinobu was not about to cover his face with his hands and turn the other way.

He stared straight at her cleavage with the appraising eye of a jeweler.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Oh, I see you’re honest with yourself. And… Fwa ha ha!! I am Freyja, goddess of love and beauty! Not only that, but I am the great goddess with free control over half of Asgard’s army!!”

“I see, I see. Of love and beauty, you say? I see! So you’re an expert in those fields, are you!? I’d like to hear more about that! Just how far can I go before you’ll get mad, goddess!?”

“You should probably be more worried about yourself. You’ve been frozen in a block of ice for so long that your soul ascended to the heavenly world of Asgard.”

“Eh? So I’m dead tits!? So tits that means tits I’m not tits ‘back’ tits at all tits! What tits am I tits supposed tits to do titty tits!?”

“That’s quite the one-track teenage mind!! I’m saying your frozen body was left behind on the surface! You’re having an out-of-body experience and you’re a little bit dead right now!”

“Ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti!!”

“Wah! Are you saying it too quickly to fit the whole word in there!? Well, calm down. I just gave you the bare minimum of information, so how about we get down to business? Norse goddesses don’t hold back as far as this is concerned. It’s just that kind of legend, culture, and religion. In other words, there are no brakes!! How about I give you a hands-on lesson as to why I’m known as the goddess of fertility, Shinobuuuu!?”

“This is where the guy would normally throw on the ‘pathetic MC’ brakes, but not ‘Talk of the Town’ Jinnai Shinobu! He stomps on the gas instead! The dead may have rights, but they have no responsibilities! Plus, this is a foreign world and it’s with a goddess, so there are no morals, ethics, or virtues to stop me!! There are no brakes on my end either, so let’s get this started, Lady Freyjaaaaa!!”

Just as rose and lily petals began scattering through the air, Marriage Goddess Frigg silenced them with a fist.

According to legend, Frigg was Odin’s wife. She did not make many appearances, but she was known to borrow his power and authority to control Asgard’s army. As a substitute for the world’s greatest god of war, her fist was far from weak.

The impact was strong enough to create a crater covering the entirety of the Kantou Plain which would form a new bay, but Freyja did not avoid it. As a fertility goddess, she instead received it head-on and absorbed it within her body.

She managed to keep the scene in the realm of comedy.

“Gfhhh!! Heh. Even I would’ve been in trouble there if I didn’t have the power and authority to control half of Asgard’s army.”

“Why would you mention that in front of his wife? You only have that because you became my husband’s mistress to swipe some of his power. And could you stop acting as a reference point for Norse goddesses? You’re the only person in all nine worlds uninhibited enough to sleep with four dwarves for a single accessory.”

“Eh? Four guys and one girl!? But that’s…um…how would…? Wait, if she put that there and twisted like this…no, that still leaves one of them out!! Is it like some kind of puzzle ring or when you try to fit too many plugs into an outlet!?”

“Heh heh heh. There are a surprising number of bizarre solutions out there, but maybe it’s too much for a mere high schooler!”

Frigg swung down her explosive fist again and the goddess of beauty finally fell silent and held her head.

Frigg then put her hands on her hips.

“Well, it’s extremely rare for a soul to ascend before the body is destroyed, but what are we supposed to do about it? The quality of your soul was determined as soon as you ended up in the heavenly world, so maybe we should give you a proper welcome.”

“The heavenly world? So this is heaven?”

“You’re probably thinking of something from a different religion, but the general concept is mostly the same. This is where the chosen winners in life end up.”

“You mean…! You mean…! My good deeds have earned me a heavenly reception that no human hands could ever reproduce!? And you aren’t going to charge me some outrageous fee after the fact!?”

“(Hmm. Why isn’t he questioning the fact that he’s dead or crying that he wants to go back?)”

When surrounded by multiple goddesses, he of course wanted to go on a bit of a detour before getting back to the main task.

“Hell yeah!! I’ve always wanted to try out a divine attraction like this! What’s going to happen? They say only the honest people who have cast aside their desires end up in heaven or the Pure Land or whatever, but it’s surprisingly full of jewel-covered palaces and beautiful goddesses!! Now, now. It’s time to let Sommelier Shinobu judge the quality of the heavenly services available here!!”

“O-okay, then.” Freyja was still rubbing the top of her head, but she had stopped crying. “At the very least, I can guarantee you’ll enjoy yourself to death. Any of the ‘dreams of men’ are granted here. All the men who end up in Asgard go at it from morning to night with sweat scattering everywhere from all the movement.”

“Why do men like doing that so much?”

A powerful electrical current surged from Shinobu’s right temple to his left.

His adolescence was exploding.

“Seriously!? This place is really filled with that kind of debauchery!? Th-then can we end the scene right here? While the focus is elsewhere, I’ll sneak around back and enjoy myself!!”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. You don’t have to sneak. Everyone’s open about it here.”

“Seriously!? What is wrong with Norse standards!? (Not that I’m complaining.)”

“Okay, time for the announcement! When Norse men die, they go to Asgard!”

“And?”

“Year-round, from the moment they wake up to the moment they go to sleep, they never get a moment’s rest!!”

“Because!?”

“*Because they’re given the right to wield a weapon and eternally fight to the death!!*”

“Hmm!?”

Shinobu had been tapping the “yes” button so fast he nearly did so again, but he just barely managed to stop his mind from continuing on.

He needed to back up a bit.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!! What!? What kind of hellish service is that!? And wait. How is that even a service? It’s just hell!”

“Eh? Oh, don’t worry. Even if your heart is torn out or your head lopped off, you’ll be good as new the next day. You can continue fighting to the death forever until Ragnarök comes along☆”

“I have to continue fighting to the death all the way up to the final battle and then get thrown right into the end of the world!? And there’s not even any days off!?”

Frigg sighed with an elegant hand on her cheek.

“Why do men enjoy fighting so much? After living out their life and being guided to Asgard, you would think they would finally want some time to rest, but they spend every

day using giant hammers to smash open or crush people's heads and they never seem to get tired of it."

"Oh, no. I was just thrown into the twisted slaughter paradise sitting on the borderline between S and M that some soldier thought up because he can't find any meaning in life other than blood and smoke. Please no! What happened to my debauchery!? Where's the alcohol and women!?"

"Hm. That's not really the kind of paradise a high schooler should be talking about either."

But the mass of desire named Jinnai Shinobu was not going to let Freyja's comment get in his way.

His adolescence was already exploding!

"Oh, but come to think of it, I've only seen goddesses around here. Is this one of the worlds where the only guy is surrounded by nothing but female characters? Then I'm all for it! Okay! Let's get the mock battle started where I have my way with a female warrior in bikini armor or a sorceress in a nude cape!!"

"Where *have* all the men gotten to, Lady Frigg?"

"The queen of the underworld has been more active lately, so they were probably sent out in case something happens. It's what people call waiting in the nude for further news."

Shinobu's nose twitched slightly.

"I can sense it. Yes, I can sense it. Being a queen instead of a princess is a bit of a downside, but I still sense a rare kind of beauty! Who is this girl who sounds like she would wear black bikini armor (as the one girl among the four generals)!? Is she a friend of yours!? Then tell me her email address!!"

"Hm? Hel's the youngest of the three children of Evil God Loki and Giantess Angrboða. The other two are the giant wolf Fenrir and the great serpent Jörmungandr."

"Hmm… So is she the type with a woman's upper half and a snake's lower half? This just got more difficult."

But after all his time with Youkai girls, Shinobu was not deterred.

Not only that, but Frigg rejected the idea.

"She looks just like a beautiful girl."

“Then what were you worrying me for!? And if she’s the youngest, that means she’s a little sister *and* a queen. What more could you want!?”

“However, half her body is alive and the other half is dead.”

“Eh? So she’s a zombie or a mummy? Well, as long as she looks like a lively young girl wearing nothing but bandages, a mummy’s fine by me! Keep it coming! Keep it coming!!”

“(Seriously?) Umm, as her title suggests, Hel rules the icy underworld of Niflheim. She has direct control of all the human spirits that can’t get into Asgard and she uses them to form the army of evil spirits that opposes the gods.”

“Huh? Is that really how you’re going to explain it?” complained Freyja. “Well, she may be queen of the underworld now, but she didn’t have that power from the moment she was born. It was only after that bearded head god banished her to the underworld that she gained the power to rule it as queen. So her properties and abilities before then may have been completely different.”

“What in the world are you talking about, Miss Dancer?”

“It all started with a prophecy saying the three children of Loki and Angrboða would oppose the bearded head god. During Ragnarök, Fenrir swallows Odin whole while Jörmungandr grows infinitely to crush the land and ultimately kills and is killed by Odin’s son Thor. That’s why Odin needed to put together some countermeasures before that happened.”

Then what about Hel?

If she had been banished to the depths of the underworld, surely she was prophesied to cause some dreadful catastrophe.

However, Freyja shrugged at that obvious question.

“*No one knows.*”

“What?”

“Even as one of those three disastrous siblings, the prophetesses and the three goddesses of fate couldn’t tell what kind of role she would play. All they know is that she has the same level of power as Fenrir and Jörmungandr.”

“Wait a second. You mean… You mean she has enough power to kill the head god, yet she hasn’t been stained by evil and she’s just a beautiful girl left all alone because everyone fears her power? That’s amazing!! She’s gotta be a virgin! All you ball-less cowards have left this piece of perfection untouched for me! Gwa ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“I really don’t think it’s that simple,” said an exasperated Frigg while looking down on Jinnai Shinobu. “Whatever her origins, she truly is the ruler of Niflheim now. You really should think of her as a diabolic queen.”

“Then all the blame falls on that bearded Odin guy you’ve been talking about! If he hadn’t thrown poor Hel-chan into the underworld, she would still be an adorable heroine!! But this is still exciting. The former straight-A student’s pure body is back and this time it’s tightly wrapped in seductive black leather bondage gear.”

“I will admit she may have been treated roughly.” Frigg waved around her raised index finger. “Since Fenrir and Jörmungandr are dangerous, that bearded man decided Hel had to be too and banished her.”

“He doesn’t see them as Loki’s kids. He sees them as three creatures that evil god created. It’s not about good and evil. He just wants to seal that destructive power at the bottom level of an abandoned facility. And I’m sure he used his usual self-centered logic to believe he did the right thing and saved the world. He’s the type that never understands why so many people are trying to kill him.”

“Well, he is the kind of person who names himself the head god without a second thought.”

“How shameless do you have to be to say you’re perfect? And that god of war, magic, and fraud isn’t even a beautiful girl. He’s a bearded macho man.”

The filthy bearded (self-proclaimed) head god had thrown an icy beauty into the abyss for his own safety as casually as someone ordering another beer. The more Shinobu heard, the worse Odin sounded. In modern Japan, it would have been about time for someone to yell at them to stop gossiping and get to work.

But Jinnai Shinobu did not particularly care about that bearded man.

“So you’re saying Hel-chan really is beautiful!? Is there anything we can do!? Is there any way of turning her back into what she was before!? That’s what matters!!”

Beauty Goddess Freyja and Marriage Goddess Frigg exchanged a glance.

“Well, I’m not sure.”

“Whatever she was originally and however she got where she is now, she’s doing quite well for herself. She may not have chosen this, but it seems to have suited her surprisingly well and she’s gotten really used to it. And,” she added. “As I said before, she only became queen of the underworld later and her original properties and abilities are still a mystery. It’s possible she holds something that surpasses even Odin’s imagination.”

Part 2

"Hello, everyone. Could you hurry back to your own worlds now?"

The fourth warrior maiden sister, Waltraute, asked that as soon as she arrived at the inn.

Kamijou and the others had been eating breakfast at the bar/restaurant and they looked annoyed when they heard her. The only one without a reaction was Jinnai Shinobu because he was frozen solid in an ice coffin.

And since they could actually feel annoyed with this, the girls were clearly getting used to their nude capes and bikini armor. Adaption was a truly frightening thing.

"That's one hell of a greeting."

"I see no reason why strangers would be reluctant to leave this world. I've found a way to send you home, so I can do so at any time."

"Eh?"

Quenser and Heivia were taken aback.

"Wait a second. We're leaving already? But we haven't defeated anything or gone on any kind of adventure."

"And we haven't met a mermaid sitting on the rocky shore or a blonde-haired long-eared elf! What's the point of a fantasy world otherwise!?"

A Norse goddess stood before them and two Youkai sat at the same table as them, but the two idiots did not seem to notice. They seemed to categorize those things differently from the kind of fantasy that was accompanied by 8-bit music.

Waltraute put one hand on her hip.

"We were the ones caught up in an unexpected situation, so there was no reason to make strangers take care of it. I took care of the necessary investigation and defeated the enemy, so you can simply accept the result."

"Hm?" Mikoto tilted her head. "Enemy? So there was someone behind all this?"

"Well, this kind of thing is almost always the work of Odin or Loki and this time it was Loki."

Part 3

In one corner of Asgard, Waltraute had grabbed Loki – who looked intellectual, attractive, and somewhat of a bad boy – and shook him by the collar.

They were on the very end of the edge of Bifröst, the rainbow runway. Normally, the gods and Valkyries used it to fly to the surface, but it had been transformed into a light torture facility. Simply put, Loki was hanging from a single arm and his legs were dangling over the edge of the "cliff".

"B-bfh-bgbh…"

When the attractive man spoke, he sounded like a pig, but that was because Waltraute had beaten him to a pulp as soon as she found him.

"Bffh."

"Yes, I already know you used Skíðblaðnir and Yggdrasil to call in several strangers from truly foreign worlds. You used the world tree's ability to grow when it absorbs the water of the well of wisdom to extend the branches to worlds other than our nine. …But how do I return those strangers to their original worlds? Depending on your answer, I may just let you drop from here."

"Bgh. Bggh."

"Hm? The branches are still connected to the other worlds?"

"Bh."

"The water of the well of wisdom makes the world tree grow, but it can wither when that water is sucked out? Just like when Níðhöggr bites into the roots? So you damaged the base of the irregular branches to make them wither?"

"Bffh. Bfh."

"So if the wounds are plugged with something and the 'leak' is stopped, the withered branches will return to their original positions and function as bridges again? So if the strangers return to Skíðblaðnir, they will be automatically returned to their worlds?"

Part 4

When he heard that, college student Anzai Kyousuke grew pale.

He was a man who understood adventure.

“That’s not enough. We have to clear several dungeons on our own, visit villages and towns to gather hints from villagers and townspeople, and clear the normally impenetrable barrier deep in the mountains to challenge the demon king to single combat!! How can you just give us the answer like that!? Do you have any idea how the villain has to feel after preparing so much for this day!?”

But Waltraute was not fazed.

“Well, gods always cheat.”

“Still, there’s something wrong with reaching the ending by sitting around in the inn! All we’ve done here is eat and sleep!! Shouldn’t we actually be punished for that!?”

“I don’t care what the villain thinks. And all of the heroes were looking for the shortest and quickest route; it just so happened that a great adventure was their only option. If an easy option presents itself, you have to take advantage of it.”

“Well, I suppose…”

Anzai Kyousuke continued to complain, but Waltraute ignored him and continued on.

“You have no real reason to stick around in this world. And whatever Loki might have been planning, we don’t know how long his safety mechanism will last. If the temporarily withered branches truly die and cannot return to normal, it is all over. There is no reason to let this chance escape and increase the risk of never being able to return home.”

Kamijou and the others had no arguments on that point.

The bunny girl raised her hands to stretch her back in her chair.

“Ahhh!! So we can finally get back! …Hm? Come to think of it, what’s going to happen to me when I get back?”

Quenser and the Zashiki Warashi added onto that.

“At least we know we have a way back. Of course, I doubt Frolaytia is going to accept a logical explanation of what happened. In fact, I bet she’ll treat us like deserters and throw us in a cell.”

“A Zashiki Warashi’s house is supposed to fall into ruin when she leaves, but this doesn’t count, does it? It would leave a bad taste in my mouth if I got back to find they were buried in debt.”

They had not put any real effort into anything, but everything felt like it was over. Although the number of people who could appreciate a long RPG that takes an average of fifty hours to complete may have gone down in recent years.

So Waltraute spoke to sum everything up.

“We will take care of all the difficulties, so you only need to hurry to the rendezvous point.”

“Hm? The rendezvous point?” asked Heivia.

Waltraute replied as if he had asked a very stupid question.

“I said you would be using Skíðblaðnir, didn’t I? You have to gather there first.”

“Wait. Wait a second.” Mikoto sounded like she had heard something she could not overlook. “Skid…whatever you said…is the giant ship we were originally on, right?”

“What else would it be?”

“We walked for nearly a week to get here, but it won’t be that way this time, will it? There’s a helpful item that lets us quickly or instantly travel to villages and dungeons we’ve already been to, right!?”

Waltraute cracked her neck before answering.

“Of course not. You have to walk all the way back.”

Part 5

Niflheim was a hopeless land entirely covered in white snow and ice.

It was a comfortable environment for Hel who ruled that underworld, but the same could not be said of the human souls cast into that abyss.

The jangling of their thick chains never ended.

Even the will to cry out in pain had been worn away, so they suffered in silence. Those “sinners” looked more like machines or dolls than humans.

There was an old man who had collapsed from old age.

There was a child who had been too sick to ever leave his hospital bed.

There was a mother who had died in childbirth but at least managed to bring her child into the world.

"..."

Hel stared at them in that white world.

Odin, ruler of the nine worlds, had proclaimed them "evil". He desired valiant and powerful warriors and any human souls who would not help him with Ragnarök were deemed "evil".

She had never questioned it before.

She had accepted it as normal.

"..."

It was unlikely that applied only to her.

Those "sinners" suffered until their minds broke and there was no end in sight for them. There was no purification, no rebirth into the next life, and no other system to save them. They were simply discarded here and forever abandoned, but even they had given up and saw no other option.

After all, this was the way of the world.

After all, everyone was taught that this was normal.

After all, Odin had unilaterally decided on these rules and created the system.

But...

"..."

Hel herself was not sure what exactly was brewing inside her.

Those minstrel-like strangers had told her the truly foreign moral tales of their worlds and that had broken the gears inside her.

Or perhaps the strangers themselves had been the cause.

She heard the jangling of a chain. This was a dissonant noise that stood out from the standard pace of the others. A small child had collapsed into the deep snow.

While Christianity had demons and Buddhism had oni, the Norse underworld had no specialists to torment the sinners.

The whips and clubs were held by translucent amorphous humanoid silhouettes.

Human souls were used to torture the “sinners”.

To the gods of Asgard, souls that could not take part in war were useless objects that would be no help during Ragnarök and Hel reused them as her own army.

Of the “sinful” souls who were crushed further every day, only those able to be reused were added to her army.

However, that was no salvation for those souls.

The killers, the killed, the torturers, and the tortured were all identical human souls.

They had no sense of brotherhood. That normal sense was thoroughly crushed during the eternal torture received for their supposed sins.

Some souls writhed in pain like machines and others tortured them like machines.

“…”

And that same sight continued as far as the eye could see.

It was obvious what would happen to the collapsed child’s soul.

The torturer ghosts gathered around the child who had disturbed the system and they held whips and clubs in their hands. They had no efficient set of steps or a manual. If this child would not stand back up, they would beat him until he did. If he would not obey, they would destroy his body until he did.

He was only a dead soul.

He was only a never-ending being that had shifted outside the normal ecosystem.

He was only trash that the gods had decided could not be saved.

“…me.”

But at that moment, Hel muttered to herself.

And her voice rose to a yell that shook Niflheim.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Odiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!!!!!”

She stomped across the white snow and ice and forcefully kicked away the torturer ghosts swinging their whips toward the child’s spirit.

But those torturers had simply been given that role.

They were also human souls sent to Niflheim. The head god had judged them “useless”, so they had been thrown into a world of eternal torture where great pain would wear away even their ability to feel fear or put up any resistance.

Hel truly looked at her surroundings once more.

There were no “sinners” here. Not a single one had done anything wrong, be it stealing, lying, or killing.

And yet they had all been given that label.

It was all for Odin’s benefit and they would not benefit him any. But more importantly, it was due to the actions of Hel herself while believing in that system. She had truly believed that these victims were “evil” just because they were of no use to Odin.

There was no salvation for them.

Nothing was going to change.

Nothing could be changed.

In this world, the bearer of justice and the god who proclaimed himself on the side of good was only thinking about himself. Nothing else could be relied on to purify them. And no matter how rotten or ridiculous he was, Odin and the army of Asgard he commanded were the strongest and the largest, so they could say they were the good guys and do whatever they wanted. Even if they were wrong, nothing would change. Not ever.

If she had never questioned it, she may have at least been able to numb herself to the pain, but now she knew.

Not even she knew what had caused it, but now she knew.

She knew something was wrong about this.

She had realized something obvious.

It would have been simple to say she had grown.

But in this hopeless world of combat, it may have been more accurate to say she had broken.

And if she could only obey the movement of those gears…

“Break…”

She begged.

Hel, queen of the underworld, begged.

But not to the gods who were only concerned with their own desires and benefit. She begged to her own heart.

“Break it all!! Break everything ‘here’!! Break every last piece of it!!”

Something writhed in the center of her heart.

She was no longer the “Queen of the Underworld”, that silly role Odin had given her after the fact.

This was something massive that had been there since the moment she was born. It was something different from what Fenrir or Jörmungandr contained and it was something the prophetesses and the three goddesses of fate had been unable to grasp.

Part 6

The first to sense it were Kamijou and the others. They thought it was a small earthquake.

It was not even worth ducking down and hiding inside a solid cabin. The ground shook a little and it quickly subsided.

“What? So they have earthquakes here too?” asked Kamijou while panting from their long trek.

“In Norse mythology, earthquakes are said to be caused by the god named Loki. The other gods sealed him in a cave to punish him and every time a snake’s poison causes him pain, he struggles and shakes the earth.”

“Is everyone here an S? What is wrong with Norse society?”

As Loki had been beaten to a pulp by Waltraute, he was obviously not yet locked up in this era.

And a short distance away, the two exhausted idiots named Quenser and Heivia were discussing something else.

“Hey, Quenser. Did you recognize that just now?”

“Yeah. That wasn’t an earthquake. *It was more like the tremor of an explosion travelling through the ground.*”

♦

The next to sense it was the human boy who was always clinging onto Waltraute’s waist and back. He thought it was a large gust of wind.

Incidentally, he was not with Waltraute that day. He normally apprenticed under a mead maker, but it was unfortunately raining that day. As Norse culture lacked paved roads and the construction techniques needed to build retaining walls for rivers, falling rocks, or landslides, it was not all that uncommon to be stuck indoors because the weather was bad. It was not just the farmers and fishers that had to worry about the weather.

Also, Norse culture had no large-scale educational system.

For anyone but a royal or noble surrounded by tutors, basic language and arithmetic skills were taught by the parents when they had some spare time, but that could easily create a spiral of stupidity where stupid parents produced stupid children.

For that reason, the village shaman would occasionally go around to each home, make sure the children had an acceptable level of education – or rather, the bare minimum needed to survive – and would help fill any gaps. (And he would never forget to include some religions lessons that ensured a shaman had a place in the village.)

On this day, the old shaman showed up at the boy’s house.

However, it was rare for the shaman to actually have to provide supplementary lessons, so the lecture was a lot closer to a friendly chat.

“The gods, the humans, the evil spirits, and the elves live in the nine worlds which are all supported by Yggdrasil. We all manage to coexist somehow or another.”

(Come to think of it, I haven’t seen Hel in a while. I want to draw with her.)

The boy ended up staring out the window while only half-listening to the shaman, but the old man did not get angry.

“Light God Baldr was one of Lord Odin and Lady Frigg’s sons and no beings or weapons in any of the nine worlds were able to harm him. If not for Loki’s trickery, he never would have been killed.”

As previously stated, the point of the lessons was to ensure a minimum level of education in the village and to maintain the shaman’s influence (so the village still

thought he was necessary). As long as those two points were met, no one cared if the rest accomplished little.

But at that moment, the boy noticed something out the window.

"?"

At first, he thought it was the wind. Something invisible was rustling the leaves of the trees.

However, it was not wind.

All of the windows noisily shattered and the doors flew off their hinges and into the buildings. It was a massive shockwave that rushed along the earth in a single direction.

Normally, the boy's small body may have been bloodied, but the old shaman spread his overly-large cape and covered the boy from harm. And as this would maintain his influence, the old man grinned behind the boy's back.

"Mister, what is that?"

The boy pointed out the broken window.

Something massive loomed up in the distance. It was so large it was easy to forget how distant it had to be and it seemed to stab deep into the shaman's brain through his eyes and optic nerves.

It was difficult to describe. The closest approximation would be a massive pitch-black tree that towered up toward heaven.

The shaman had only just explained that the nine worlds of the Norse world were supported by the world tree, so what was this?

What was this tree that was large enough to rival the world tree?

"That might be Lady Hel."

"Hel?"

"Is that black mass the sins of the dead? The only one who could wield that…no, the only one who could wield it and remain at its 'core' without being torn to pieces is Lady Hel because she can directly control that sin."

♦

The first to see what it truly was may have been Jinnai Shinobu up in Asgard.

He stood on the edge of Bifröst, the rainbow runway the Valkyries and gods used when heading out into the outside worlds.

A pitch-black vortex filled a large chunk of the expanse of land visible below the clouds. It was huge. It was simply massive. It resembled the typhoons or hurricanes seen on weather maps.

He was only able to view it so calmly because it was not going to reach him directly. Instead of just viewing it like someone else's problem, he looked down at it like a typhoon that had canceled school for the day.

"I guess they have disasters everywhere. Typhoon, cyclone, hurricane, willy-willy. I don't know what you call it here, but…huh? Do rainclouds really look black from above?"

Shinobu sounded carefree, but the gods had been shouting and running back and forth. This seemed to be a big deal for them and the muscular runway controller Heimdallr shouted a warning at Shinobu.

"Guest, stand back, stand back! We're about to begin excitation of the takeoff catapults for lanes one through seven!! …Oh, yes, yes. I'm working as fast as I can! And no matter how hard I work, it still takes time. If they would rather jump off before reaching critical speed, tell those nine fighting-obsessed sisters they can go right ahead. They'll just end up decelerating and crash into the ground!!"

"Eh? What are you preparing? It doesn't sound like a rescue mission."

"Lady Frigg, Lady Freyja!! You've got nothing better to do, so you handle the explanations!!"

The shirtless Spartan of a man dragged Jinnai Shinobu away and chucked him out of Bifröst.

He was waved over by Freyja, the blonde twintailed goddess who would never grow up no matter how old she got.

"What you're seeing down there isn't weather. You should be able to tell based on how high up we are here, but it's too big to be a normal typhoon or hurricane. It's over eighty kilometers across, after all."

"What are you talking about? The really bad typhoons are that big, aren't they?"

"Geh. For real!? Your world's natural disasters are that bad!? Is your weather god on strike or something?" Freyja looked annoyed. "That's a disaster, but not a natural one. I suppose it's all of the sin borne by the sinners cast down into Niflheim. Each one of them may be weak, but gather them together, and you have a great torrent of power!! Sounds like a special attack, doesn't it?"

“What? I don’t really get it, but you’re saying it’s a concentrated form of people’s malice and hatred?”

Jinnai Shinobu did not laugh at that because he interacted with Youkai on a daily basis. If one looked deep enough into the origins of those twisted versions of the Youkai seen in picture books and fairy tales, it was not uncommon to find some bloody story of killing or being killed.

However, Freyja rejected even that.

“No, it did come from humans, but it wasn’t produced by humans.”

“Hm?”

“It’s the gods who judge human souls and it’s the gods’ job to overwrite those souls. You only become a sinner because a god calls you one, so the god can make good into evil or evil into good. So it would be best not to think of what you see swirling around down there as hatred or resentment. If anything, you could probably call it the ego forced onto them by a selfish god.”

“You mean it’s like throwing muddy clothes into a washing machine and expelling all of the stains at once?”

“Probably. Honestly, why is Hel taking this all so seriously?”

Once again, her thinking seemed to jump ahead like a needle skipping on a record.

The gods had all of the data ahead of time and had already finished considering all of the possibilities, but Shinobu had no advance knowledge and could not keep up.

“Eh? Eh? Wait a second. Why did you just bring up Hel-chan, the unfortunate bad girl?”

“First, what we’re seeing are the souls of the sinners cast down into Niflheim. Second, Hel has the strongest control over those sinners. And third, no one but Hel could enter that vortex and escape unharmed.”

Freyja sounded exasperated.

“And when I say sinners, I don’t mean the souls in Niflheim are those of liars, murderers, or thieves. Anyone who isn’t any use to Odin is branded a sinner and sent down there to be disposed of. So what if Odin’s stamp is removed from them? The souls will no longer be sinners and they might be able to travel to Asgard. And even if not, they won’t have to continue suffering in Niflheim. That’s probably what Hel was thinking anyway.”

The girl had questioned something.

She had been unable to allow something to continue.

She had tried to strip those suffering people of their false “sins”.

She had transformed herself into their way out in an attempt to rescue them.

“Wait, wait, wait. Are you serious!? Then Hel-chan’s a real saint! Who cares about that bearded Odin guy!? Hel-chan’s more worthy of worship than some god who arrogantly creates ‘sinners’ for his own convenience!!”

“Don’t be stupid. It isn’t this easy.” Freyja sounded annoyed. “I don’t know how much power a ‘god’ of your world has, but the title is pretty cheap for us. There are some who we don’t even know what kind of power they have or what they can do. We just kind of treat all of the Æsir as gods.”

She sighed.

“Baldr was called the god of light and justice, but even he was killed by Loki’s scheming and sent down to Niflheim. *I don’t know about anywhere else, but here, gods aren’t absolute.* And Hel isn’t even a god, so there’s no guaranteeing her safety.”

“Which means?”

“The souls sent to Niflheim will literally suffer forever. That includes everyone since the dawn of history who wasn’t chosen by Odin. Saving every single one of them and bearing all of their sins goes far beyond what a single person can accomplish. Odin is the most powerful of us all and I doubt even he could do that.”

“Wait a second. But Hel-chan isn’t trying to do anything more than that, right? She doesn’t have an ulterior motive; she really is trying to save the souls that were made into sinners?”

“That’s what makes this so much trouble.” Freyja put a hand on her hip. “Hel has to know she’ll burst if she tries this. But she can’t stand to see those sinners suffer, so she’s trying it despite having no chance of success.”

“What do you mean ‘burst’? You mean if she fails, she doesn’t just get to rest and try again!?’

“This is why all of the virtuous gods of Asgard are panicking. If Hel explodes while bearing all of mankind’s sins, no one can begin to guess how far the damage will spread. Just to be clear, this world has been prophesied all the way up until it ends in Ragnarök, but even the prophetesses and the three goddesses of fate say they don’t know. *No one knows what’s going to happen, but it’s looking even worse than the battle that will destroy the world.* You can see why this is such a big deal, right?”

That was why some were attempting to end this before that happened.

They would deal with Hel before she exploded.

They knew what she was thinking and how much she had suffered.

They showed no remorse despite having caused this by creating those many sinners for their own convenience.

Hel herself had not even been proven to be good or evil. She had simply been judged by a bearded and muscular old man in an eyepatch and sealed in the depths of the underworld.

"…"

Even after all that, Hel had not wished to be saved.

She had wished to save others.

Even after having so much stripped away from her, she had wished to give more away.

"There's nothing we can do. Because her motives are so pure, no amount of intimidation or negotiation will accomplish anything. That leaves suppressing her by force as the only option. It makes you wonder what's to become of the world when not even the gods can remain idealistic, but reality is forcing our hand here."

"What…?" muttered Shinobu.

Freyja assumed he was enraged at this unreasonable world and cursing the imperfect gods who ruled it.

However, she was proven wrong.

"That's so exciting!! If that's the case, she should just tell everyone instead of trying to do it all herself! What's wrong with wanting to save all of the innocent people being treated like sinners? And the queen hoping for that is actually an unfortunate heroine who was cast down into the abyss by the gods, but if it's all dealt with and everyone's saved, it makes a nice happy end!! Ha ha! This is finally feeling like a real fantasy. You can't find anything this exciting holed up in a closely-regulated rural village!!"

"Wait, wait! I understand sympathizing with Hel, but approaching that black vortex would be suicide. And it's wrong to think a human can solve something the gods can't. If a human touches that, it'll be torn to pieces."

"Are you sure?" Jinnai Shinobu grinned. "A god alone can't do anything to stop it? A human alone can't do anything to stop it? I know what that's all about. …But have you forgotten? I came from another world filled with foreign techniques."

"?"

"A Package is a method of extracting the power or traits of a Youkai and using it for criminal purposes. If a human and Youkai attack each other, the human will lose, but a Package can be used to extract some portion of the Youkai's power and it can sometimes be amplified or concentrated into something greater than the original Youkai. In other words, a human can win the fight under certain circumstances."

He paused for a beat.

"I don't know if a Package can be used against a god, but it works with Youkai and other monsters that aren't quite up to that level. From what I've heard, Hel-chan has power on the level of a god, but isn't one herself. *That means she fits the bill.* If I incorporate her into a Package, I might be able to accomplish what she can't on her own!!"

However, Shinobu himself was only a normal high school boy and he did not know how to build a Package on his own. He would have to get some help from the Zashiki Warashi and Yuki Onna who had been living for hundreds of years.

Freyja had clearly been caught off guard by this suggestion.

"Are you serious? No, but wait. In that case… No, no. Are you sure you haven't overlooked anything? I feel like there has to be a terrible downside to something so convenient."

"Hey, hey, hey! No need to grind to a halt now! We've got everything we need and a small crack has already run through the exit-less labyrinth's wall! So what's there to hesitate over? I can't do much on my own and a crack is just a crack, but if I widen that crack, I might just be able to drag out a god!"

"Oh, right. Your group was apparently on its way back to your original worlds, but what happened with that? And won't you be left behind if you stick around up here in Asgard?"

"Are you serious!? Where do those idiots think they're going without me, the center of the universe!?"

♦

Colorful light trailed through the sky.

Waltraute, fourth of the nine Valkyrie sisters, flew through the sky with the aurora trailing behind her. She appeared with her giant white horse in front Kamijou and the others who had finally reached Skíðblaðnir.

The black vortex, pitch-black tree, or collection of all the sinners' sin towered above them as she spoke from horseback.

"The coordinates for your addresses are being rapidly distorted. I beat a solution out of Loki, but who knows how long it will lost with that thing here! You may only have the one chance to return home. With so many pressing concerns to take care of, I can't see you off, but remain aboard Skíðblaðnir no matter what happens. That will take you home!!"

Heivia shouted back while watching the Baby Magnum use the movable landing slope to board the ship.

"What on earth is that black thing anyway!? And is it headed this way!?"

"It shows no sign of approaching! As long as Hel does not move at its center, it will stay put, so you need to return home before she notices you. Any objections?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Mikoto as Waltraute stared at the distant tower of black.

"I must do something about that."

"Based on what Hel said, I thought you only saw this world as preparation for Ragnarök or setup for the next world," pointed out Kamijou.

He received a single answer.

"Do you really think everyone wants everything to go according to that bearded god's plan?"

The sound of scraping paper reached the back of Waltraute's ears and a distant goddess's voice reached her.

"Okay, okay. I'll ignore that dangerous statement this one time. This is Freyja, the goddess of beauty! Also, you need to get back here. The nine Valkyrie sisters are the cornerstone of Asgard's forces, so it'd be a problem if you weren't working for us."

"Understood."

"And I have one other thing to report. That boy husband of yours just set out toward that black vortex holding a wooden board and a painting set made from plant dyes."

"Bfh!!"

The cool beauty began to choke.

She turned her back on the confused looks from Kamijou and the others and she continued her conversation with a whisper.

“What is he trying to do!? And why does he keep doing these things!?”

“Who knows. From the looks of it, he might just want to paint with Hel.”

Freyja paused for a beat.

“*Or maybe he actually wants to save the queen of the underworld.*”

“Tch.”

“Asgard’s army is waiting for the optimal timing to bombard that black stuff swirling around her and we want to have a strategy meeting concerning that and some other things. Oh, and Odin is of course not a part of this. This is between Lady Frigg and me, so get back here. If you don’t do anything, that boy really will be in trouble this time.”

“When has one of his adventures not gotten him into trouble!? I understand the situation, so I’ll be right there!!”

With that said, Waltraute turned toward Kamijou and the others with a look that said she regretted each second that passed.

“I’m sorry, but I have told you everything I can. At any rate, stay here no matter what happens. That will bring an end to your unreasonable adventure. Understand!?”

With a flash of light, an aurora trailed behind her as she flew toward Asgard on her white horse.

Kamijou and the others were left behind on Skíðblaðnir.

If they stayed put, they would be returned to their original worlds.

What happened to this world afterwards would not affect them in the slightest.

“So.”

Heivia casually crossed his arms and asked a testing question.

“What do we do now?”

“Well…”

Kamijou was the one to answer and he let out a long breath before continuing.

“This unreasonable world is really starting to piss me off.”

Part 7

The boy walked across a vast stretch of land.

The pitch-black tree was majestic enough to weigh on the hearts of everyone in the world who saw it, but no matter how far he walked, he could not reach it. It felt like trying to chase the sun or moon on foot. This was because it towered up from around Hel on a scale rivaling the sun or moon.

Even so, he was approaching bit by bit.

He continued on using his two feet.

“I’ll save Hel.”

He checked the weight of the bag on his back and faced forward again.

“I want to draw with Hel, so I won’t let her say goodbye.”

And then the boy reached it.

He reached that land of swirling despair located at the furthest reaches of the world.

He had travelled to a few of the nine worlds already. For better or for worse, he was a dreadfully good walker and this time it was most definitely for the worse.

After all, if he had not arrived here, he would not have learned what he did.

After all, if he had given up on the way, he would not have run across this.

“…?”

All too twisted blackness existed before his eyes. It may have looked like a massive vortex when viewed from heaven, but it only looked like a massive wall from his perspective.

He could not grasp the full scope of the black vortex or tree located ahead of him, so his eyes locked onto something else.

Deep in the blackness, he saw something other than colored wind. He felt countless gazes staring back at him from beyond the sandstorm. Something prickled in his ears. It felt like insect eggs on the verge of hatching. It felt like they could burst at any moment and an uncountable number of “something” would spill out.

“What…is this?” he muttered.

According to the old shaman, Hel stood at the center of this.

But the boy had not realized just how repulsive a thing it would be to simply stand there.

In fact, the shaman probably had not known either. It was even possible that not even the gods knew despite claiming to know everything.

They had called this a collection of all the sin extracted from the sinners cast down into the underworld.

But it was not.

Or rather, the substance swirling around Hel was indeed the concentrated form of the sin flowing from those sinners, but what peered out from within clearly surpassed that.

It was not of this world.

It seemed to have come from somewhere else.

It was far more repulsive and beyond understanding. It seemed unlikely that anyone looking it in the eye could share their emotions with that horrible grotesque swarm.

"Hel…"

The boy looked up at the black tree once more.

Hel was inside. She had been surrounded, blotted out, and swallowed up by that grotesque swarm.

"Hel!!"

He had no arrows or shield.

The boy simply called her name and tried to charge inside the black vortex.

But a powerful grip reached his shoulders from behind.

He was forcefully pulled back and away from that blackness before anyone could learn what would happen if he touched it.

And then Kamijou Touma slowly breathed out.

"Sorry about stopping you like that, but if you're going to do this, do it right. You can't just charge blindly in and accept failure if it comes. Hel's life is resting on your shoulders right now."

"Eh? What?" The boy blinked in confusion. "I thought Waltraute guided you home."

“We thought about that,” answered Quenser. “But it would have left a bad taste in our mouths. We’ll deal with our own problems somehow, but the girl named Hel comes first. I saw you try to charge in there without a second thought, so I think I already know, but I still want to check. What do you want to do about Hel?”

The boy briefly fell silent and then gave a quick answer.

“I want to save Hel.”

“Sounds good to me.” Higashikawa Mamoru smiled. “I don’t care if it ruins Hel’s own determination or if it isn’t what the gods up in heaven want. We want to do the same and that’s why we’re here. In that case, we can be friends.”

“But this was a problem that we couldn’t solve on our own,” said Nanajou Kyouichirou. “We may have people who ended World War Three, who go around destroying the ultimate weapons that can withstand nuclear weapons, who confront cruel incidents even as they’re tossed about by the world’s Absurdity, or who live on while fighting natural-born killers, but we’re still only strangers in this world. Even if we solved each incident as it came, we still need to head home eventually. So…”

The leaf swimsuit Zashiki Warashi continued from there.

“If we truly want to solve this world’s problems, we need to get the help of someone who lives here. We can help, but we can’t end this. Are you prepared to do that in our stead?”

The boy looked up at the Zashiki Warashi and nodded.

“It’s not that I want to save her,” he immediately replied. “I *will* save Hel.”

“Okay.” Kamijou nodded. “Then you’re our final trump card. Whether you call it the preliminary match, paving the way, clearing the path, or whatever else, we’ll prepare the route you need to reach Hel.”

Kamijou Touma tightly clenched his right fist.

This time, Index, the girl wearing only a cape, opened her eyes wide to analyze the enemy.

Similarly, Misaka Mikoto, with the bare minimum of protection provided by the bikini armor, scattered electricity while flicking a large coin up into the air with her thumb.

The relatively immoral Quenser and Heivia began preparing their military explosives or assault rifle.

The Princess who resembled an ice doll lightly stroked the levers that operated her colossal weapon.

The Zashiki Warashi in a leaf swimsuit simply smiled calmly.

The Yuki Onna embracing Jinnai Shinobu's frozen form in her impish bondage bikini began freezing her surroundings with her usual look of ecstasy.

College student Anzai Kyousuke prepared himself to face the Absurdity of the world.

Higashikawa Mamoru let his special ability blossom so he could win any gamble.

The bunny girl released her murderous ability.

Nanajou Kyouichirou thanked his ability to always avoid fatal injuries no matter what happened.

Satsuki in her dancer outfit pulled out the special rubber rope that symbolized crushing death.

Finally, Kamijou Touma spoke for them all.

"Okay, let's get this started."

Their enemy was the queen of the underworld, the souls of all the humans unfairly cast down into that underworld, and all the sin they had borne.

This was the story of a girl who had wished to save them all and had been broken.

"Prepare yourself, Hel! We're about to destroy every last piece of that illusion!!"

There were no side characters here.

With this many protagonists, anything was possible.

CHAPTER 4

[Series Introduction 5]

The Unexplored Summon://Blood Sign

After thoroughly researching summoning ceremonies, this world accidentally discovered what lurks beyond the gods. Shiroyama Kyousuke cannot ignore the cursed words of "help me" and he continues to throw himself into deadly battles with summoners.

第四章

【シリーズ紹介その5】
未踏召喚://ブラッドサイン

召喚儀礼を研究し尽くした結果、神々の奥に潜む者を見つけて『しまった』世界。城山恭介はたすけてという呪いの言葉を振り切れず、今日も召喚師達との死闘へ身を投じる。

Part 1

13990th Strategic Intelligence Analysis Report.

Concerning the three biological weapons created by Loki.

No answer found. Incomplete analysis included.

Written by Light God Baldr.

♦

(Addition)

Classification: “Frozen” Level 4 – Authority to refuse access requests included. Strictly managed.

♦

What exactly is Hel?

She is one of Loki and Angrboða’s three children. Fenrir is prophesied to eat Odin and Jörmungandr is prophesied to grow too large and crush the land, but no one knows what Hel will do.

And because we do not know, she is viewed as dangerous.

Odin sealed her in the depths of Niflheim and that is where she gained her position as queen of the underworld.

But looking at this story rationally reveals several strange points.

First of all, Norse mythology is a society of combat ruled by a god of war.

Anyone one dislikes, anyone dangerous, and anyone in the way of one’s growth or path will be killed. There is no reason to forgive an enemy. That is the culture and religion of our world. The most famous form of trial is by combat. The one in the right will gain the favor of the war god and will surely win. In other words, the victor can name himself just. Strength says everything in this society because of the religion and the god at the foundation of it all.

In that case, why would he need to let Hel live?

If Odin had feared her, he would not have simply imprisoned her in the underworld. Wouldn't the normal response have been to kill her as soon as she was born?

There is no answer to this question.

But I do have a guess.

Odin does not have a sympathetic enough heart to have felt sorry for his young enemy and gone easy on her, so perhaps he did not actually let her live.

In other words, it was not that he *did not* kill her; he *could not* kill her.

That line of thinking supports an extremely interesting theory.

Now, what exactly is Hel?

She is the queen who rules over Niflheim, she is the grim reaper that manages the souls of the dead, and she holds one of the triggers to Ragnarök because she is the one that orders Níðhöggr to bite at Yggdrasil's roots so the tree will wither and the nine worlds will be destroyed.

And besides these frightening facts, she also possesses another noteworthy characteristic:

Hel has been given the authority to rule all nine worlds.

To put it simply, that is the same authority as Odin and no one knows why this is. One theory says Odin gave her the authority because he felt sorry for her after unfairly casting her into the underworld, but as previously stated, it is highly suspect whether that god of war has a sympathetic enough heart for that.

Now, let me suggest a bold theory.

A grim reaper that manages the souls of the dead may sound frightening, but Odin actually possesses the exact same power. He gathers the human souls that come to Asgard and uses them to form the Einherjar army.

How is that any different from Hel who rules the underworld and creates an army from the souls of the dead?

And as previously stated, she has the authority to rule all nine worlds "for some reason".

So…

Doesn't this mean Hel is identical to Odin? Doesn't this mean she is a second head god?

If so, she has the power and role needed to be just as much of a threat to Odin as Fenrir and Jörmungandr. And yet it does not matter if Hel herself is evil or not. In fact, the better a person she is, the less of a leg to stand on Odin has.

Only one head god is needed.

And people will want to worship the most just, kind, and powerful god they can.

If there were two candidates for head god, a festive mood would fill the nine worlds and a general election would begin. If they have the exact same power, then the more popular of the two would end up on the throne.

Now, it is time for a fundamental question.

Is Odin all that desirable of a god?

He is a cunning god who fears the prophecies, he frantically prepares for Ragnarök, and anyone who will not help him win that fight is branded a sinner and cast down into Niflheim.

Meanwhile, Hel was sealed in the underworld due to the fears and anxieties of that other god. She retains the purity of the driven snow and can still develop into a good or evil person.

The current head god has only held the position because he is the only one who can do the job.

But if someone else could wield the same power under the same conditions, which on would the people accept as head god?

This is why Odin did not kill Hel. She has the exact same power as him, so it would come to a draw if they fought. He could not afford to make such a foolish mistake. And if he truly tried to kill her, Hel's survival instincts could awaken the power within her. That would signal the beginning of the end for Odin. He could not let it get out that there were two head gods with the exact same power.

And so he sealed Hel in Niflheim.

That way, her "role" would be overwritten with the silly "queen of the underworld" title and she would forget about her power as the head god.

But how long will that last?

Odin is aware of the problem, but he cannot reflect on his own actions and he can only feel safe and secure by oppressing others. He is undoubtedly walking onwards despite having already swallowed the seeds of eternal destruction.

♦

(Addition)

- This document is far removed from authentic Norse mythology and would negatively influence many cultural traditions, so Odin has personally frozen it. To unfreeze or view it, Level 4 or higher permissions are required. Also, please be aware that the names of anyone who does view it or even requests to view it will be automatically sent to Odin.

Part 2

There was no longer any reason to hesitate.

Kamijou and the others ran toward the massive pitch-black vortex and plunged inside.

They did not know what kind of effects it had, but if it was based in Norse mythology and thus constructed from a supernatural power…

“I can negate it.”

Kamijou swung his right arm as he spoke.

He could not exactly negate the tree itself. It would immediately regenerate no matter how much of it he destroyed. Still, he could briefly scatter the portion around their group.

“We can do this! Hel’s power isn’t altogether hopeless!!”

“Hah. And we’ve got the Princess on our side. We ran into one of Hel’s soldiers before, but that robot was nothing against the Baby Magnum’s cannons. There’s no stopping us now!!”

Yes, they had the firepower of the Baby Magnum on their side.

For the moment, only the Black Dragon Níðhöggr had been able to endure its attacks. Most of Hel’s forces could be destroyed with a first generation Object and the confusion of suddenly being thrown into this Norse world had contributed to her trouble in the fight against Níðhöggr. They would have the advantage now that they were on top of things.

That sense of safety may have helped them charge into the vortex without hesitating.

Incidentally…

“Wait… What is that?”

Mikoto frowned as she ran.

She was a Level 5 esper who controlled electricity. She could use it as a simple attack, but she could also use magnetism and electromagnetic waves to scan her surroundings.

That was why she was the first to notice.

A massive form was approaching them from beyond the black screen.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” groaned Quenser as he came to a stop.

The others stopped as well. It felt more like a giant mountain than an enemy. Nothing could be better described as “blocking the way”.

It was over fifty meters tall.

Its spherical main body could endure a direct hit from a nuclear weapon and its surface was completely covered with over one hundred cannons. Some were low-stability plasma cannons, some were laser beam cannons, some were railguns, some were coilguns, and some were rapid-fire beam cannons.

It used a cross-shaped air cushion propulsion device and had chainsaw-like treads for auxiliary propulsion.

A main cannon resembling a metal bridge was attached to either side of the cross-shaped footing.

They were rapid-fire beam Gatling guns made by strapping together five barrels each. At close- or mid-range, that grim reaper of the battlefield could provide enough overwhelming cannon fire to unilaterally wear down the enemy Object.

Kamijou Touma did not know its name.

Neither did Index.

But Quenser did and he squeezed out the words as if he was having trouble breathing.

“Isn’t that an Information Alliance second-generation Object? Isn’t that the Oh Ho Ho’s Rush!?”

♦

Hel stood in the center of the pitch-black vortex or black tree.

She had already discarded her title as “queen of the underworld” and returned to simply being “Hel”. She was aware Kamijou and the others were approaching and what they were saying.

The blackness raging about her was an illness eating into her yet it had also become a part of her.

It was her fingertips, her eyes, and her ears.

So she had noticed the people trying to save her.

So she had despaired.

(Why?)

They were trying to save her. They saw the swirling blackness as evil and they were trying to strip it from her.

But stripping it from her would mean she could not save the people deemed to be sinners. It would mean saving her alone, forcing the sin back onto the sinners, casting them back down into Niflheim, and starting their eternal torture anew.

(Why can’t you show this same kindness to everyone else?)

Kamijou Touma and the others may not have realized how it worked.

They may not have known rescuing her would mean suffering for so many others. They may not have known just how raw and repulsive the torture techniques hidden behind those words were.

But it no longer mattered.

Hel had decided she would save them…save all of the humans.

She had decided to bear it all herself and become another great god.

So…

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

She cried out in despair.

She called to the blackness that swirled around her and had become a part of her.

The nine worlds of Norse culture were supported by the branches and roots of the world tree, but Loki had twisted those branches in impossible directions and stretched them out to the completely foreign places Kamijou, Quenser, and the others had come from.

What Hel did may have been similar.

However, she did not use Yggdrasil.

Some who saw it may have seen it as a massive hurricane. Others may have seen it as a *black tree*.

In other words, this second great god had created a brand new system with a brand new tree.

This was why she was said to have the same power as Odin and why that one-eyed god had sealed her away along with the true fear she brought him.

♦

SUMMON://call.another_world.address_point@Heavy_Object.“Rush”.

♦

Somewhere in the world, a great mass welled up like mist.

It was a colossal weapon of war that exterminated its foes with great firepower instead of the more peaceful methods of the nuclear age. After the collapse of the United Nations, a few different world powers had risen. One of those was the Information Alliance and this second generation Object was a crystallization of their military technology.

♦

SUMMON://call.another_world.address_point@The_Zashiki_Warashi_of_Intellectual_Village.“Hishigami_Mai”.

♦

The black tree guided a new form in from somewhere.

It was a freelance agent who had set an artificial Youkai known as a Shikigami as her hypothetical enemy and thoroughly modified her body until she could kill the Youkai that were unaffected by physical attacks.

♦

SUMMON://call.another_world.address_point@Killer_Queen_and_Deep_End.“Shizuna_of_Electrocution”.

♦

Somewhere else, someone was pulled up like bubbles rising from a swamp.

She was a dangerous criminal who freely massacred people like a natural disaster even after being designated a banned killer. She had reached the depths of madness in her obsession with the preservation of corpses and collected the corpses she created with a modified stun gun so as not to spill any blood.

♦

SUMMON://call.another_world.address_point@A_Simple_Survey.“White_Girl”.

♦

A white torrent appeared that threatened to destroy the black tree itself.

It was the manager who gathered together every Absurdity. This overwhelming existence had been connected to Prometheus who gave fire to man and to the Banshee said to predict people’s deaths. A certain inhumane organization even viewed her as the Philosopher’s Stone.

♦

SUMMON://call.another_world.address_point@A_Certain_Magical_Index.“Accelerator”.

♦

And the deciding factor was released.

It was Academy City’s #1 Level 5. His power let him freely transform momentum, heat, electricity, or any other vector. He had even shown signs of taking one step beyond the realm of science and into the realm of magic.

♦

“Gaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Hel had the authority to rule the nine worlds and therefore the entire world. She had created a new black tree, sent its branches and roots out without holding back, summoned great violence from other worlds, and continued to scream. She yelled on and on as if to say this was not enough and that she was not going to let it end here.

The violence she birthed spread devastating destruction instead of the crying of infants.

The monsters did not hesitate to charge toward Kamijou and the others.

Without a doubt, this catastrophe would continue until she was truly saved.

But they had all realized something: this was the true scream of the girl known as Hel.

Part 3

The eldest sister Brynhildr.

The second sister Gerhilde.

The third sister Ortlinde.

The fifth sister Schwertleite.

The sixth sister Helmwige.

The seventh sister Siegrune.

The eighth sister Grimgerde.

The ninth sister Rossweisse.

When Waltraute, the fourth sister, was included, the nine of them formed the Wagner-style Valkyrie sisters.

They would descend to the human world of Midgard, gather the souls of powerful warriors and wise sorcerers, and take them back to the heavenly world of Asgard to join the gods' Einherjar army. There, the souls would be welcomed with combat training (usually in the form of fighting to the death), food, and drink while they prepared for the final battle of Ragnarök.

But one would be wrong to assume they relied on the souls of warriors to fight.

The Valkyries themselves were more than enough to crush the enemies of the gods.

The relationship may have been similar to that of a huge warship or aircraft carrier with their escort ships and aircraft.

Currently, the voice of Heimdallr, manager of the rainbow runway called Bifröst, reached their ears.

"Excitation of takeoff catapults one through seven is complete. You can reach critical speed at any time!"

“Understood. We will leave in order, form up, and exterminate Hel before she can cause more chaos.”

As Brynhildr gave a business-like response, Rossweisse gave an exasperated comment in her overly thick armor.

“Why does Bifröst only have seven colors, anyway? If it had enough for all nine sisters, we could all head out at once without any kind of time lag.”

“Slowing us down is meant to balance our power. If it looks like another force could defeat him, Odin changes the rules. That’s just how the world works.”

Ignoring Brynhildr’s explanation, Gerhilde gave a doubtful comment from elsewhere.

“By the way, I see Waltraute didn’t join us yet again.”

“There’s been something wrong with her ever since she came into contact with that human boy. …And I’m not just saying that because I’m jealous of my younger sister for getting married before me.”

No one was listening to Ortlinde’s muttered comment and another transmission came in from Heimdallr.

“Lady Grimgerde, Lady Ortlinde, Lady Gerhilde, and Lady Schwertleite, I have confirmed your connection with the catapult. I will divide up the energy and redistribute it between all seven to shorten the recharging time for the other three. Is that okay!?”

Rossweisse laughed as she replied.

“Sure, sure. A line’s forming up, so just get us out there!!”

Their bodies were broken down into colorful particles and a tremendous surge of particles shot along the runways with an aurora trailing behind them. It looked less like an aircraft taking off then it did some strange kind of thick beam weapon.

Their extreme acceleration took them to 87% of the speed of light, but this extraordinary method accomplished that on the scale of Newtonian physics instead of Schrödinger quantum theory.

This wartime infrastructure allowed them to instantly send a great military force anywhere in the nine worlds to slay the enemies of the gods.

However, something strange happened this time.

There was trouble during takeoff.

Waltraute interfered and hit her sisters with an incredible attack as they prepared for takeoff.

She used a Spear of Destroying Lightning, a beam weapon created by compressing massive amounts of energy. This projectile weapon could melt any kind of metal and could burn away everything all the way to and beyond the horizon if its energy was released.

This time, it dropped down from above to tear into the rainbow runway.

The Valkyries who had been broken down to particles lost their balance when this sudden interference hit them. They rotated wildly around like defective fireworks and dropped randomly to the surface before they could recover.

Brynhildr instantly roared a name as she and the second wave prepared for takeoff.

“Waltraute!!”

“I am sure you see this as an irrational disaster, but unfortunately, my husband says he is going to save Hel. That means he will have to face the gods as well as Hel, which I would much prefer not to happen.”

“Are you planning to start a fight here?”

Everyone listened to Brynhildr’s quiet question yet ignored Heimdallr’s scream at the damage to the runway.

However, Brynhildr was the least amused.

Needless to say, she could not use her full power while preparing for takeoff and the nine sisters’ top priority was to quickly stop Hel and the chaos she was spreading, not to fight each other.

Wasting time here would be getting her priorities backwards, but at the same time, she could not think of any way to avoid Waltraute and safely takeoff.

After some thought, she reached a decision.

“Heimdallr, prepare the second group of takeoffs as planned.”

“Are you serious!? I think you’ll be shot down if you force yourself to accelerate!!”

“That is fine. I saw Waltraute’s accuracy just now and she cannot shoot down every last one of us.”

She coldheartedly decided to sacrifice her allies…her sisters.

“It doesn’t matter if only two or three make it through. Getting the Valkyries to Hel is what matters here. We don’t need all nine of us to crush her and we can’t waste our time fighting one of our sisters. This is the quickest way to settle this.”

Meanwhile, Waltraute took a leisurely step onto one of the runways and she lightly swung the Spear of Destroying Lightning she held.

“It was Grimgerde and Ortlinde that I failed to hit. They don’t stand out much, so it doesn’t matter. They won’t be able to do much even if they do get there.”

“Um, Waltraute! We have communications open, so we can hear you from down here!”

The cry of Grimgerde’s soul exploded out, but Waltraute and Brynhildr ignored her complaint and clashed head-on.

Part 4

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Misaka Mikoto gave an out-of-character shout.

As one of the seven Level 5s, she was known as the Railgun, Academy City’s #3.

However, even her life was in danger when attacked by one of the colossal weapons that had ended the nuclear age.

She was up against the Rush, an Information Alliance Second-Generation Object.

Its main cannons were rapid-fire beam Gatling guns created by strapping together five barrels each. A single shot contained enough firepower to *melt a warship into an orange puddle* and it was accurately firing them at a rate of several thousand every minute.

Beam weapons were a military technology using electron beams.

That was good news for Mikoto who could control electricity. The barrage would normally have been unavoidable, but they bent “unnaturally” just before hitting and flew off in a different direction.

However, this was far from a perfect defense.

“Oh, crap!! This thing’s more powerful than that #4! I’m going to be pushed back at this rate!!”

A concerning rattling started coming from the clasps to her bikini armor.

It was the Princess in the Baby Magnum that responded to the threat.

Objects could survive nuclear weapons, but another Object's firepower could send them to their grave.

The base of the main cannon arms rotated to select low-stability plasma cannons. The seven arms moved and the weapon that could end a war with a single attack released all of its stored energy such that it filled even the Rush's possible avenues of escape.

The tremendous bluish-white beams tore apart the black screen, but just before hitting the Rush, their trajectories split and another form came into view.

Kamijou's eyes opened wide when he saw it.

"This isn't good! You need to get out of the way!" he shouted.

His words were not going to arrive in time.

The plasma had reached tens of thousands of degrees, but Accelerator easily manipulated their vectors just before they hit him. They reflected right back at the Baby Magnum and the Princess frantically moved the machine to the side, but one of the bridge-like main cannons was still torn off by the orange light.

Most likely, the #1 could only be defeated by Kamijou's right fist.

However, he could hardly make it all the way up to that enemy.

"Gh!?"

Strength on the level of a crane grabbed his collar.

He saw Hishigami Mai, a girl in a tank top and hot pants, directly in front of him. She accurately threw off his balance to briefly but surely keep him from moving and she held long, thin knife in her other hand. It looked like a sashimi knife dyed in military colors.

She was going to take off his head.

But just as a chill ran down his spine, dry gunshots burst out to the side.

Heivia held an assault rifle, but Hishigami Mai kept one hand on Kamijou's collar and simply moved her upper body around to avoid the 5.56mm rifle bullets.

"You've gotta be kidding me!!"

Could he have changed the outcome if he had used the time spent shouting to do something else?

Kamijou heard the sound of a swinging bat as his entire body was thrown through the air. The high school boy crushed and knocked over Heivia who was still trying to aim his rifle.

Heivia struggled and saw Hishigami Mai switch to a small handgun with a suppressor attached, so he made a split-second decision.

“Hey, Sir Knight!! Throw a bomb in there!!”

What looked like a mass of clay flew through the air.

Quenser had thrown the military explosive named Hand Axe and, without even hitting the ground, it exploded right in front of Hishigami Mai’s face.

More than ear-splitting, the explosion felt like a punch to the gut and a prickling pain raced across Kamijou and Heivia’s skin. Index was forced to hold down her cape with one hand.

“Did that get her?”

“Not yet,” said the Zashiki Warashi in a tropical leaf swimsuit. “Someone who works for Hyakki Yakou won’t be defeated so easily!”

A blast of wind swept away the dust and revealed Hishigami Mai.

A girl wearing a short kimono stood next to her. It was the Deadly Dragon Princess, an artificial Youkai – or Shikigami – created as her hypothetical enemy. Normal physical attacks meant nothing to a Shikigami, so Mai had used it to protect herself from the blast.

“You monster! Were you sent back by a time machine wearing sunglasses or something!?”

However, the despair did not end there.

As Index hid herself below her cape, she opened both eyes and instantly divulged the makeup of the Shikigami.

“The image source is Otohime from Urashima Tarou. The trait of luring humans down to the depths has been distorted and broadly interpreted to put together a combat Shikigami. Okay, nothing to worry about. That isn’t a monster with no weaknesses!!”

Elsewhere, a dull crack filled the air.

It came from the White Girl and the rope of special rubber wrapped around her neck.

The Killer Queen spun around and around like a dancer and her weapon made use of her specialization in crushing deaths. Simply put, she had applied enough pressure to the delicate White Girl's neck that it had broken.

The head swung loosely, but there was no hint of pain or fear in the White Girl's eyes. Her neck was unnaturally bent almost to a right angle, yet she thrust her slender fingertips toward Satsuki.

The bottom of her pure white dress came apart, became rolls of film, and filled the entire area.

"She…has no life?"

The Killer Queen shuddered at the odd sensation she felt through her weapon, but she immediately rejected the idea.

"No, wait. What is this!? This is something even more dreadful. It feels like simply touching it means the end!!"

"Parameter change. Abandoning anti-Anzai Kyousuke bodily structure. Applying 'Horror' storyline patch. From here on, the 'story' will not end at mere loss of life."

The infinite rolls of film stretched out eternally and attacked Satsuki with the sharp edge of a razor blade.

Higashikawa Mamoru and the bunny girl faced the other killer, Shizuna of Electrocution.

The stun gun in her hand emitted an explosive sound one would never expect of something so small.

"What do you think, archenemy?"

"I'd say this is unbelievably Absurd, but unlike us, it doesn't feel like the actual person has been dragged into this world. It's more like a shadow from another world was brought here."

"Then if we defeat that, it won't affect the original person?"

"Isn't she a killer? Wouldn't we be doing her world a favor if we took her out?"

As the two discussed the issue, Shizuna took a casual step forward and threw something into the air from with her other hand.

It was a large number of small screws.

And just before those screws fell, the killer in charge of electrocution swung her modified stun gun.

A flash of light covered everything.

The deadly lightning rushed every which way like a complex spider web, but…

“Don’t think you can get by with just that.”

“We may not look it, but we’re the Unbeatable Emperor and the Ever-Victorious Challenger. We both possess an Absurdity that won’t let us lose any kind of luck-based gamble☆”

It did not matter if the odds were one in a million or even one in a billion.

As long as there was a slight gap in the spider web, they could slip through it with ease.

“But…”

Shizuna laughed.

“Have you forgotten? I’m the killer in charge of electrocution. Youkai and gods are one thing, but do you really think I’ll lose in a fight to the death against other humans?”

In yet another spot, college student Anzai Kyousuke and the never-dying boy, Nanajou Kyouichirou, cowered down while surrounded by explosions and gunfire.

Really, this was the normal reaction.

“Hey! What are we supposed to do!?”

“Trying to do anything with all these monsters around will just get us killed. I may not die, but I’ll still be out of the fight if I get a limb blown off! So let’s just try to help someone who can actually do something. Let’s see, the closest person would be…”

They spun around to look but their gazes froze on a single spot.

They saw Jinnai Shinobu’s ice coffin and the flat-chested Yuki Onna pressing up against it in her impish bondage bikini.

“Eh heh heh he

Part 5

The boy watched the battle.

Kamijou and the others had said they would clear a path for him, but it was not going perfectly. In fact, more powerful enemies from different systems appeared from the black vortex each time Hel cried out, so the chaos was only growing.

And then a great shadow covered the boy.

It was Níðhöggr. The two hundred meter black dragon was a faithful servant of Hel's and it possessed enough firepower to match the Baby Magnum when they fought aboard Skíðblaðnir.

"Ah."

If the boy was hit by an attack from that beast, he would not even leave any ashes behind.

In fact, he would be crushed beyond recognition if its massive form simply continued straight down.

However, Níðhöggr approached while splitting apart the surface of the ocean like an airplane making an emergency landing and it stopped so perfectly in front of the boy that one would think it had used lasers or ultrasonic waves to take measurements down to the micron.

The wyvern then pressed its head against the ground and seemed to create a slide from its entire body.

It was ready to have a human climb on top.

"Are you helping me so I can save Hel?"

The boy did not receive a response.

Níðhöggr was not equipped with the organ needed to speak the human tongue, but that did not mean it did not understand human emotions.

This dragon had always done what it thought would help Hel and that usually meant faithfully protecting her.

But now it had decided that *not* doing so would help her more.

"Take me to Hel so I can take her away from there!" said the boy.

The dragon's growl contained a hint of agreement.

The boy climbed up the dragon's head, crossed its long neck, and reached the top of its large torso. After making sure the boy had taken up his position, Níðhöggr flapped its wings which were the size of a small plaza.

However, a new light appeared in the heavens to prevent it from taking off.

It was a giant chariot drawn by two goats. The only comparable method of flight was Santa Claus's sleigh, but this chariot was not filled with the hopes and dreams of children or with piles of presents.

It instead contained the god of destruction who ruled over lightning, thunder, and divine punishment.

This was Thunder God Thor's chariot.

"I am here on the orders of my father Odin!! Unclean one, cast aside your wicked hopes and give yourself over to the divine hammer!!"

Thor held Mjölnir.

As far as pure destructive power was concerned, that hammer was greater than Odin's Gungnir and it was so heavy that only two people in the entirety of the nine worlds could wield it.

One swing and it could smash to pieces even a mountain-sized giant.

Even Níðhöggr would have no way to withstand the blow.

However…

An attack from a third party pierced Thor's side.

It resembled a dragon and most people would see it as an Eastern dragon rather than a Western wyvern.

This being had continued to grow without limit from the moment of its birth and was now long enough to encircle the nine worlds.

And during Ragnarök, this great serpent was prophesied to kill and be killed by Thor.

"Are you Jörmungandr!?"

"Did you really think I wouldn't show up, little boy?"

One might have likened it to a missile trailing smoke if it had not been so large.

The serpent's lizard-like eyes approached with no discernable emotion within and it spoke via its thoughts.

"My cute little sister is all worked up about saving some people and a lot of other people have gathered to save her, so did you really think her brother could just sit idly by and watch?"

"Wait, so that's it."

With a sharp click of the tongue, Thor stared not at the approaching Jörmungandr but at something far overhead.

And he gave a roar while glaring up at Asgard.

"Was Hel only a diversion meant to bring our forces down here, Loki!?"

Part 6

Incidentally, after being beaten to a pulp by Waltraute and left only able to speak like a pig, Loki had mocked her (while using the fact that she could not understand him to his advantage).

"B-bfh-bgbh…"

(*Fine, fine. I lose.)

"Bffh."

(*Or maybe we should call it a draw. I lost, but I managed to sow the seeds. Once the buds of evil sprout, the world will be renewed all on its own.)

"Yes, I already know you used Skíðblaðnir and Yggdrasil to call in several strangers from truly foreign worlds. You used the world tree's ability to grow when it absorbs the water of the well of wisdom to extend the branches to worlds other than our nine. …But how do I return those strangers to their original worlds? Depending on your answer, I may just let you drop from here."

"Bgh. Bggh."

(*Well, my objective was halfway complete from the moment those strangers were summoned here, so I don't really care about returning them to their original worlds. But if you do want to know how, I'll tell you.)

"Hm? The branches are still connected to the other worlds?"

“Bh.”

(*Yes. All I needed to do was drive Hel insane through contact with foreign morals and foreign ethics.)

“The water of the well of wisdom makes the world tree grow, but it can wither when that water is sucked out? Just like when Níðhöggr bites into the roots? So you damaged the base of the irregular branches to make them wither?”

“Bffh. Bfh.”

(*And despite Odin’s great influence, Norse culture still justifies anger at having one’s family killed. Now, who are Hel’s brothers? The Great Serpent Jörmungandr and the Giant Wolf Fenrir. …I think it’s about time for that wolf to break his chains and devour Odin.)

“So if the wounds are plugged with something and the ‘leak’ is stopped, the withered branches will return to their original positions and function as bridges again? So if the strangers return to Skíðblaðnir, they will be automatically returned to their worlds?”

Part 7

A single river flowed through Asgard.

If one followed it upstream to its source, they would find a prison that intimidated anyone who approached.

The river was actually the drool overflowing from Fenrir’s mouth. That beast was prophesied to devour Odin, so a sword had been thrust upwards through his lower jaw to forever prevent him from closing his gaping maw.

His entire body was bound by the unbreakable rope known as Gleipnir. That rope had been made from several “impossible to acquire” materials and no beast could tear through it. But once that impossibility was accomplished, Fenrir would be released into the world and his anger and hatred would consume Odin.

The rage and resentment at the source of his power had already exceeded the critical point.

The upper limit meant to last until Ragnarök had long since been passed.

Or perhaps this very day was the end of the world.

That had been Loki’s goal in driving Hel, Fenrir’s sister, insane.

“Fenrir, you understand, don’t you?”

A god stood in the prison.

He was Týr, god of combat. Before Fenrir had been bound by Gleipnir, he had been the single individual to understand the raging and uncontrollable beast. Just before being bound with Gleipnir, Fenrir had suspected a trap and insisted one of the gods place their arm in his mouth before he would let them bind him. If it was a trap, he would bite that god’s arm off.

That was why Týr had only one arm.

He was a former friend who had had no choice but to obey Odin. Behind the name of a combat god was a man who had done as the higher ups insisted and betrayed his friend.

“This anger is exactly what Loki wants. That would be the greatest disgrace to you who wants to live free without being bound by anyone. So you can’t let him get the better of you. Loki is simply using Hel to have you eat Odin ahead of schedule and change the scenario of Ragnarök.”

“Then…”

Despite being unable to move his legs or close his mouth, the beast’s gaze was as frightening as any of the gods and he used his thoughts to ask his former friend a question.

“Then who will save Hel? You?”

“Well…”

“No matter how hated we are by the world, we are family. We are siblings who share the same blood. …If someone was going to save her, this may not have happened. But no one will save her. They won’t even try. And yet you all have the nerve to call yourselves gods!”

The prison creaked.

The supposedly unbreakable Gleipnir gave a cry of discord greater than ever before.

“If no one will save her, then what’s wrong with her brother doing so? What’s wrong with wanting to save her!? I don’t care about Loki’s schemes. I will save Hel of my own free will and I will bite through anyone who stands in my way, whether they’re that evil god or that head god!!”

What is the greatest reason for which people kill? suddenly wondered Týr.

Money? Hatred? Honor? Family? Love? Pleasure?

None of those was the answer.

He was certain that justice was the correct answer. He doubted any other motive had taken more lives.

Fenrir was filled with anger justified by the familiar (or even clichéd) desire to protect his family. That was why he would not be easily dissuaded. No logic could defeat justice. No logic could refute justice. No matter how much bloodshed it brought, anyone with justice filling their hearts could not be stopped. If you wanted to stop them, you had to be prepared to crush their very soul.

Justice and evil were different.

Justice would prevail.

And that was why justice was a dangerous thing that had to be handled with care. If it was sent out of control, it would produce a tragedy greater than glorification of evil could ever hope to match.

"Let me give you one chance here, Týr."

Fenrir looked on the verge of breaking free of Gleipnir at any moment, but he spoke quietly.

"Are you prepared to stick your remaining arm into my mouth? Can you swear to me that the gods…no, that someone in this world will befriend that girl…will befriend Hel? If you can, then I will stay put. If someone will save her, then I will stay here. But only if someone will feel anger for her and cry for her. I do not need some nice-sounding words. I need to know you find your words worthy of supporting something you hold dear."

"…"

A slight pause and silence followed as if some slight gravel had caught in some delicate gears.

But that was enough for Fenrir.

There truly was no one who would save Hel.

There truly was no one who would be her friend.

There truly was no one here he could rely on.

This result filled him with even more anger and hatred. The strength needed to tear Gleipnir asunder grew even further.

Týr realized the world might be done for.

In fact, it may have been done for long ago if it contained no one who could grant this desperate wish.

However…

“Hold on, big guy. If you want someone to promise you that, I’ll take the challenge.”

A sudden voice reached them.

Fenrir moved his eyes and Týr turned toward the prison’s entrance.

One of the strangers stood there.

He was a high school boy with hair dyed blonde and an untidily worn school uniform.

It was Jinnai Shinobu.

Technically, it was his disembodied spirit, but he still spun his right arm around as if checking on his shoulder.

“So I just have to stick my hand in your mouth and make the promise, right? You want to know if someone will save Hel-chan, do you? Well, someone will. Of course someone will. Don’t look down on the world like that, big guy. If no one else will, then I’ll do it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t hear me!?”

Shinobu stomped forward, shoved Týr aside, and stood before Fenrir. The wolf was as large as a bus or truck, so his gaping maw was large enough to swallow the high school boy whole.

But he did not hesitate.

Jinnai Shinobu practically threw his right arm forward and into the beast’s mouth.

“Are you people done complaining yet!? *I said I’ll go save Hel-chan right away! You got a problem with that!?*”

“…!?”

“I don’t know how much I can do. I’ll try everything I can, but I can’t guarantee that’ll be enough to save her. I’m just a high school boy, after all. But I *will* do everything I can. I really will put my life on the line to save her. Is that enough?”

“Why? What is Hel to you?”

“How should I know? That all depends on what happens. It’s even possible you might end up jealous of me, but I don’t care if it doesn’t go that well. I want to save her, so I will. Do I need to think through it any more than that? Did you?”

“…”

“I don’t know why, *but Youkai and similar things have always really liked me*. To be honest, I really don’t think you’re going to eat me here. But that’s the point. This isn’t about form, power, or attributes. What moves your heart and fills you with strength comes from somewhere else.”

The massive fangs pricked at his right arm as he spoke.

“If things are fun, we can laugh. If they’re sad, we can cry. That’s all there is to it. So anyone would get mad if someone tramples that underfoot. Yeah, I’m pissed too. But let me have this one. I’m asking you to leave your anger with me so I can take the stage. Can you promise me that? I’m only sticking my arm in your mouth because I think you’re someone who can keep a promise. So can you live up to my expectations?”

“Fine then,” accepted Fenrir. “But I will be watching, human. You have claimed you will put your life on the line, so do everything you can. If you hold back with anything at all and you fail to save Hel, I will tear off your arm as promised. Even if your physical body is not here, your arm will never move again if I tear it off of your spiritual body. That is the contract we will be making.”

“Fine by me.”

Shinobu smiled and his arm silently left the mouth.

However, he had not pulled out his arm. His entire body had floated up. He had belatedly remembered that this was his disembodied soul and not his physical body.

“Looks like someone’s finally come for me.”

“?”

“My body didn’t quite die and it seems someone’s breathing life back into it. That’s what’s pulling my soul away like this.”

Shinobu never took his eyes off of Fenrir as he floated unstably away.

He directly faced this beast that not even the gods could look in the eye.

“So I’m heading back. I’ll return to the surface and save Hel-chan with the others. And I’ll do everything I can to pull it off. You watch from here. I’ll protect your sister and keep my promise with you.”

“Hmph.”

Fenrir quietly shut his eyes as Shinobu’s body began to rapidly leave the prison.

But just before he did, Týr used his one arm to grab Shinobu’s hand.

“Ah.”

Not even the god knew why he had done so, so he asked a question.

“What am I supposed to do? What led you to do this must be something I was meant to do. This is something I have to understand. If I do…!!”

While floating upside down, Shinobu gave a clear answer.

“Figure it out on your own. Just think about what kind of life won’t leave any regrets. Don’t let yourself rot by doing things because of what others say. That’s a disgrace to the title of god.”

“Heh.”

That settled something.

Týr turned back toward the great beast that had closed his eyes to reject the world.

“Someday…”

He thought of his former friend’s maw as an extension of his lost arm.

“Someday, I’ll promise to stick my arm in your mouth again. Even if your chains have broken and your compassion has died away, the god of combat and victory will stand up to help a friend in need!!”

Týr kicked off the ground with his own two feet.

With their support gone, Jinnai Shinobu and Týr flew from Asgard like a dwarf holding a balloon to soar through the sky.

They shot in a straight line toward the front line where Shinobu’s body was.

Even at the very last moment, Fenrir did not open his eyes.

He almost looked like he was sulking, but his thoughts gave one last snort.

“Hmph.”

Part 8

The shot from the Rush melted the ice coffin and Jinnai Shinobu was brought back to life.

He placed his hands behind his head to pointlessly show off his body.

“Jinnai Shinobu☆is back!! Sorry about the wait, everyone, but we all know the true star always shows up fashionably la- oh, god!? Wh-why is the Yuki Onna indiscriminately attacking everything with that demonic look on her face!?”

The flat-chested Yuki Onna was charging toward the Rush with a truly monstrous visage.

“And why are all of you showing so much skin!? Why didn’t you call me back sooner!?”

That fifty meter weapon had ended the nuclear age, but the white storm of absolute zero (Don’t be embarrassed! It’s a legit chemistry term!) swirling around the Yuki Onna was apparently enough to affect its movements.

And once one link in the chain broke, the entire battle shifted.

First, the Baby Magnum was freed from the Rush’s attacks. Accelerator had torn away another of its main cannons, but the Princess made a quick retreat. Needless to say, the person who charged in to arrive just as the #1 Level 5 landed was Kamijou Touma.

Misaka Mikoto was also freed from the Rush’s fierce attacks. She used her eponymous Railgun to snipe Hishigami Mai with a coin accelerated to three times the speed of sound. Just as the Deadly Dragon Princess was busy dealing with that, Quenser and Heivia fired on Mai herself from a different direction.

There was no way to defeat the White Girl who was scattering film everywhere, but she seemed to defend against any and all attacks by altering her parameters in order to eliminate her weaknesses. If one constantly switched between a variety of killing techniques, they could buy time indefinitely even if they could not kill her. The Killer Queen left the White Girl in a state that was “as good as dead”.

And as he watched it all, Shinobu was asked a question by Týr who had descended to the surface with him.

“What should we do!?”

“I promised Fenrir I’d do whatever I could, so I’ll do just that whether it’ll be any help or not!! By the way, what can you do as a god!?”

“I am the god of combat and victory.”

“Then let’s use that. Let’s try for everything we need to win!!”

Having left his ice coffin, Jinnai Shinobu ran over to the Zashiki Warashi in a leaf swimsuit.

Meanwhile, Týr looked down to his one remaining palm.

“In the name of the god of righteous combat and true victory…”

He clenched his fist and thrust it toward the heavens.

“I promise these fighters certain victory!!”

There was no brilliant explosion or flash of light, but the result was tremendous.

Nike of Greek mythology and Hitokotonushi-no-Kami of Japanese mythology were known as goddesses of victory. Like them, some gods were deified for pure results such as “victory” or “success” instead of methods such as “violence” or “destruction”. An army with their favor would gain certain victory or success, so there were roundabout legends of obtaining their favor by fighting a war for the purpose of winning another war or completing a test to achieve success in something else.

Týr was the same.

He himself could not win, but he could allow any force aligned with him to win.

So…

“Oh? Ohhhhh!!”

Higashikawa Mamoru gave a strange shout as he fought Shizuna of Electrocution.

The bunny girl next to him looked confused.

“Our Absurdities are being amplified…no, overwritten? Oh, this is bad. This is really bad. We’re already manipulating probability to a ridiculous extreme, but this is pushing that up even further!!”

The battle quickly pushed onward.

The mountain began to move.

The only one who did not benefit was, as usual, Kamijou Touma.

That pointy-haired boy heard the flapping of large wings, so he looked up and saw a black wyvern. He did not know how it had ended up this way, but the small boy was sitting on its back.

Pushed on by his emotions, Kamijou shouted to them.

“Go!! The way is clear right now! Fly to Hel and save her!!”

As if to obey, Níðhöggr began to flap its wings even further.

But it was not flying higher into the sky. It was gathering strength to charge straight toward its goal like a rocket or missile.

But just before it did, Kamijou thought he heard the zapping of electricity.

However, this was not the same as Misaka Mikoto or Shizuna of Electrocution. The sound did not even come from electrical sparks. Instead, it came from the swirling power inside the great black tree.

That power was out of control.

This was clearly different from when the colossal Object or Academy City’s #1 Level 5 had appeared. The guiding hand had left this surge of power which produced intense staticky noise that hurt their ears. The space split destructively apart and its fingertips crawled out into the world.

“Who…is that?” groaned Kamijou Touma.

This was someone he had never seen before and someone he should never have run across.

And that “someone” slowly split apart the black screen and stepped out.

“*Who the hell is that!?*”

Part 9

Loki had been cast aside like garbage in one corner of Asgard, but he had done everything he needed to. That god only needed to wait for the coming result, so he grinned as it arrived.

“So it’s finally here.”

Many truly foreign worlds existed outside of this Norse culture: A Certain Magical Index, Heavy Object, The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village, Killer Queen and Deep End, and A Simple Survey.

But another secret territory existed beyond them all.

“The original world that was never to be spoken of: ————————’s ———”

That was a city that granted the wishes of any visitors but in a twisted fashion. It was a story of the very short time between when a boy and a girl ran across each other there and when they escaped.

However…

“No, wait. This is the wrong address.”

For the first time, Loki voiced a question.

The situation was moving beyond what this trickster could control.

“*Where has that black branch gone? I’ve never heard of this world!*”

An unprecedented monster answered Hel’s cry and showed itself.

♦

SUMMON://call.another_world.address_point@The_Unexplored_Summon://Blood-Sign.“Shiroyama_Kyousuke”.

♦

That was the name of a summoner who freely fought by calling in Materials, the residents of other worlds, from completely foreign places.

That was the name of a boy who controlled the uppermost limits of power and the greatest blasphemies by fighting with that which lurked beyond the gods and were classified as Regulation, Divine, and Unexplored.

Part 10

Countless red balls of light scattered around the area.

The boy who controlled them looked average enough and he wore a sports brand track suit and a hooded jacket. The one odd aspect to him was the 180 centimeter pole he held.

The catastrophe began as nothing more than a blonde girl dressed as a shrine maiden.

However…

“What?”

A moment later, the girl crumbled away. It resembled green translucent slime and the seven hundred liter monster surrounded the boy.

“What…is that?”

By the time they realized what they were seeing, it had changed form again.

It became an iron maiden-like grandfather clock filled with deadly gimmicks, it became a massive squid with thick chains in place of tentacles, it became a huge ball made up of countless beasts and dragon heads, and it became a creepy cherry tree that only blossomed after draining nutrients from humans.

“Wait a second. How much is this thing going to change!?”

The monster never retained a single form.

Sometimes it gained another body as soon as a few seconds later.

The dreadful appearance and great speed left Kamijou and the others watching in a daze.

They eventually realized that very human reaction could easily be a deadly mistake, but only after they heard Index muttering to herself while holding her cape down with both hands.

“What is this…? It’s growing…no, it’s being strengthened!?”

“You mean this thing just gets stronger and stronger!? We all need to attack it now before it grows too big!!”

Kamijou shouted to the others, clenched his fist, and charged in. The others followed suit.

But it was already too late.

A tremendous beam of light shot out.

If the Baby Magnum had not immediately moved forward and had its nuke-resistant armor melted to orange, all of the others might have been burned to ashes.

And while being protected by the fifty meter Object, Quenser looked up and trembled.

Their opponent stood a head higher than the Baby Magnum.

“Yamata-no-Orochi,” said the leaf swimsuit Zashiki Warashi. “A river, steel, and fire serpent. This isn’t some unique monster. Can this guy freely choose different monsters and gods from legends around the world and summon them!?”

“It’s moved up a step. Everything else was setup to reach this point!” shouted Index.

However, Týr glared at the monstrous serpent as if challenging it.

“But you have the god of victory on your side. Keep moving and I’ll support you even if I have to twist fate and causality so you can win!!”

They might be able to pull this off with his help.

Even in a fight between gods, the divine power of general “victory” might be of some help.

But a moment later, the Baby Magnum was flipped over like a toy.

“...!?”

Why? How? For what reason?

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

There was no time to ask those questions because Kamijou and the others had to scatter in every direction to make sure they were not crushed.

The Baby Magnum easily rolled thrice.

It did somehow manage to get its upside-down Y-shaped static electricity propulsion device back on the ground, but its one hundred odd cannon barrels were almost all smashed or bent. Needless to say, this was because its own two hundred thousand ton weight had crushed them.

But what had flipped over something so heavy?

And what was powerful enough to do so despite Týr’s power making this a field of certain victory for Kamijou’s group?

“Heh heh heh☆”

With the massive wall of the Baby Magnum cleared, the summoner boy was visible once more. And standing next to him was the “end result” of the monster he had built up to the very, very end.

It was a lovely girl.

Her silver twintails reached her waist and she wore a silver outfit modified from a wedding dress. She was covered in the color white and she leaned up against the summoner boy while crossing her arms and looking down on the others.

What had she done with those slender arms and how had she done it?

Kamijou could not find an answer, but the girl spoke with absolute confidence in her voice.

“A god? The power of victory? Who cares about any of that? That’s just one type of divinity in just one of many mythologies. Unexplored sits beyond Regulation and Divine, but I stand at the peak even beyond that. Did you really think you could stop even one of the hairs on my head?”

Her clothes rippled.

The cloth instantly transformed into massive spears, axes, and swords and released them in every direction at terrifying speed.

They destroyed any and all materials and tore even into the scenery.

They easily skewered deep into the two hundred thousand ton Object’s armor and the cloth rippled further and flipped up.

The roaring of the wind sounded like a train passing through the subway.

“Wha-...?”

What appeared before Kamijou and the others’ eyes was no longer a reliable weapon of war.

It was much more primitive and much more overwhelming.

It was a massive flail that could smash through any and every obstacle in its way.

It moved vertically, horizontally, and every which way.

Each and every attack had enough weight behind it to truly form a crater and this girl casually swung it around like the limbs of a child throwing a tantrum.

Everyone was overturned in an instant.

It was like running across the queen in chess.

“Fwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me!!”

Heivia was too busy rolling around and trying to flee to raise and aim his rifle. If he stayed put for even an instant, he would be smashed up more finely than mincemeat.

Quenser then gave a screaming shout.

“Wait! If she keeps that up, the Princess will be smashed to pieces inside there!”

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi! Quit nonchalantly pretending to be weak. Physical attacks don’t work on Youkai, so go grab that thing and stop it!”

Jinnai Shinobu shouted at her from close range, but the Zashiki Warashi only looked annoyed.

“My body may be tough, but my reflexes are no better than a human’s. It would be one thing if it was heading straight toward me, but when it’s moving around this quickly and unpredictably, do you really think there’s anything I can do?”

And that queen had more to offer than the two hundred thousand ton blunt weapon.

This was just her having some fun in her free time.

There was more to her and she would immediately switch over once she grew tired of watching Kamijou and the others running around. She would switch over to her true means of attack that had been honed to swiftly bring any battle to an end.

Satsuki squeezed her special rubber rope in both hands.

“So what do we do? We could always attack the summoner boy.”

“No, it would be deflected by the protective circle. Nothing will get through unless we have Touma’s right hand or something destroy the irrational field surrounding the summoner.”

“Oh?”

The queen laughed with a look in her eyes that was oozing contempt.

“Surely, surely you aren’t planning to lay a finger on my darling brother in my presence. You do know that warrants at least ten thousand deaths even if it is just an April Fools’ joke, don’t you?”

The queen’s clothing once more rippled and transformed into countless weapons.

Something shot in a circle from her back. One might have called them wings or mountains of blades, but that did not quite cover it. Whatever they were extended behind her like the halos drawn around the gods in religious paintings.

Each and every one of them undoubtedly held enough power to easily pierce through the Object.

Kamijou clicked his tongue and shouted to the boy and Níðhöggr who were also being held back by the queen's attack.

"Go!! We'll do something about her, so you just think about saving Hel!!"

Part 11

"Hel," muttered the boy from the great dragon's back.

Níðhöggr gave an even more powerful flap of its wings and the impact of the tremendous speed wrapped around the boy's body and sent them tearing through the sky as if the dragon had kicked off the entire world. The entire scenery grew streamlined, they tore through the black screen, and they approached the central core of the chaos where Hel waited.

"Hel!!"

Pure white cloth wriggled after them and easily broke the law of conservation of mass by creating an ocean of cloth. It all transformed into giant axes and swords and swung down one after another. But it was just barely too slow to keep up with Níðhöggr. When the weapons missed, they tore into the ground and broke down the composition of the very world, but the boy did not turn back.

His looked straight ahead.

He looked toward the girl who was crying in pain all alone after abandoning her "Queen of the Underworld" title and announcing she would save everyone.

(I'll save her.)

He did not hesitate and he felt no fear.

(I'll reach Hel and I'll take her back from here!!)

At that moment, the boy may have carried a light no less powerful than the one held by Kamijou Touma or Quenser Barbotage.

But that was exactly why Hel, as his enemy, took action to thoroughly eliminate him.

Let us go back over something.

Hel had cast aside the title she had been given and was simply the girl she had been born as, but what was the blackness swirling around her?

Some would call it a black hurricane.

Others would call it a black tree.

Neither view was wrong. It was a new world tree that Hel had created as the “other” head god. By extending its branches and roots without end, it could freely summon countless armies from outside the Norse culture made up of the nine worlds.

But at the same time, it was all the sins of the people who had been sent to Niflheim.

It was the brand that Odin had placed on anyone he saw as useless. The people’s backgrounds and actions were ignored, so they were simply cast into Niflheim and simply forced into an eternity of torture with no hope of salvation.

It was what sent people to the underworld.

It was what robbed people of all dignity.

Hel was attempting to cleanse all other souls by taking it all into herself and it was overflowing into her surroundings without end.

And worst of all, a certain boy had thrown himself into that vortex to save her.

It was human sin, so Youkai, dragons, gods, or other non-humans may have been able to endure it.

But a human stood no chance whatsoever.

In other words, it was death itself.k

To protect Hel from anything approaching the center, it rushed toward the boy.

“Ah.”

He did not even have time to cry out.

Níðhöggr had managed to escape the White Queen’s attacks as they approached from the distance, but it was unable to fully avoid its master’s attacks.

It was over in an instant.

The boy’s body was unhesitatingly tossed into that black crucible of sin and catastrophe of death.

No miracle occurred.

It was obvious what would happen.

Part 12

“.....It…can’t be.”

Something tiny snapped within Hel.

The blackness was a disease eating into her yet also a part of her body, so it acted as her fingertips, her eyes, and her ears.

That was why she realized what had happened.

Her own blackness had crushed that boy.

She had wanted to save everyone and she had been willing to bear all sins to accomplish that.

But in that desire, she had sent that sin against a human soul and cast it into Niflheim.

It was not supposed to end this way.

The sin had formed the black tree and been her tool, but she had not known it had enough of a will of its own to drain the boy of life.

But those words were meaningless.

Only the result mattered.

“Ah.”

Even after all this, Hel had retained some form of her pride.

“Ahh…”

But now even that had shattered.

As the other head god, she had hated Odin for selfishly forcing sin onto people and casting them into the abyss. She had sworn that she would never become like him and that she would produce something better.

But that crumbled away.

In the end, she had done the same.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

So this time, the being once known as Hel completely broke.

♦

In Asgard, Waltraute stopped preventing her sisters from leaving and instead stared blankly down at the surface.

She left herself so defenseless that she was just about skewered, but Brynhildr held back her Spear of Destroying Lightning.

“Ha ha.”

Someone laughed.

It was the laughter of a male god.

Waltraute turned her head like a machine and eerily silently stared at the god standing on one edge of Bifröst’s seven runways.

It was Loki.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha!! This settles it! This finally settles it! Hel has completely broken and begun down the path of destruction. When he sees it, Fenrir will tear apart Gleipnir and devour Odin!! It was all, all for this. It was all to overturn the prophesied scenario of Ragnarök that spells all of our dooms!! And now that goal has been fulfilled, everyone!! How about you rejoice!?”

“What are you going to do?”

Brynhildr was asking her sister instead of Loki.

“If you’re going to kill him, I’ll help. Just tell me what I can do.”

“I don’t mind.” Loki seemed unable to stop laughing. “Either way, calamity will spread without end once Fenrir is released. Odin is sure to be killed, but I doubt I’ll escape unscathed when I’m the one that pulled the trigger. Did you really think I would alter the end of the world if I wasn’t prepared for that?”

New movement appeared on the expanse of land below.

After enveloping the boy, the especially thick blackness scattered and cleared away.

Mere human sin was not enough to harm Níðhöggr, but no strength remained in the boy on its back. His limbs dangled limply and his hair blew loosely in the wind. He was now an object instead of a living being. He was just a misplaced lump of flesh.

But another fact stood out to the onlookers.

The boy had not been killed by a strange occult power.

"..."

A small blade was stabbed into his throat.

Paper was still considered a high-class item in this Norse civilization, so a children's painting set contained a wooden board and a few different art supplies. The "brush" looked more like a chisel. This was partially because their runes were made of straight lines and it could easily carve into wood or bone.

That was what had stabbed into the boy's throat.

And not by some criminal's hand; the boy had done it himself.

"Now, this is something else." Loki was in his element. "Ha ha!! Was the pain and fear so great that he took his own life before it could swallow him up!? It's too bad, Waltraute. He wasn't swallowed up by the sin, but this is no different. Odin will never accept someone who avoided a battle through suicide. That boy's soul will be cast into Niflheim, so you lost your chance to retrieve him as an Einherjar!!"

Siegrune and Rossweisse shared a secret thought: Oh, dear. Waltraute's definitely going to kill Loki this time. She'll rip him in two, decide that isn't enough, rip him into nine pieces, and use them to decorate each of the nine worlds.

But they were wrong.

Waltraute did not even look at Loki as she muttered to herself.

"No, something isn't right."

"?"

"What is that? Wait... Is this why he took his own life!?"

Part 13

Valhalla was Odin's palace within Asgard. And in the throne room, the eyepatched head god sat silently in his throne.

He was not shirking his duties; the throne itself was a magical item with a special ability. It was named Hliðskjálf and simply sitting in it gave him a view of all nine worlds.

And when the symbol of his power, Gungnir, was added in, he was essentially invincible.

Gungnir was a throwing spear. When thrown, it would always fly to its target's vitals, it could not be shot down or deflected by armor on the way, and after it hit, it would always return to its owner.

All an enemy could do was try not to become his target, but Hliðskjálf stripped them of even that opportunity.

As long as they lived in the nine worlds, there was no escaping Odin's attack.

"I had left this with my son and the others, but it looks like this is their limit."

Still sitting, he reached out into empty space.

At some point, a spear appeared in his hand and he began inputting targets based on the scenery visible with Hliðskjálf.

Range of Effect/Hel and the black tree expanded around her.

Maximum Radius/Unspecified. Exterminating the target takes top priority.

There was nothing that spear could not destroy. If he made a mistake, it could even destroy the world itself, but he did not hesitate. He did not particularly care about anything he could fix if it was destroyed. He was only focused on crushing the source of all this chaos.

"Why don't you realize you're committing the greatest atrocity?"

A goddess spoke out against the man who stood at the peak of the gods.

It was Frigg. She stood at the peak of productive works which made her the polar opposite of that head god of unproductive works such as war, magic, and fraud, but she was also Odin's wife.

However, Odin paid her no heed.

"Creating new things is wonderful, but when those things multiply without end, it brings about more chaos than destruction ever could. That is why someone must control it. This is no different from protecting the human body from cancer through the carefully controlled destruction of cells."

"That doesn't change the fact that your spear is powerful poison to humans."

"But in the end, it will save them. No, it may be more accurate to say it will reduce the level of damage. …But either way, this one throw will solve everything. It will all be washed clean."

There was nothing more Frigg could do.

She could speak on equal footing with him as his wife, but she was clearly a lesser god than Odin. Odin might put his spear away after listening to what others said, but it was extremely rare for him to be forcibly stopped after he had prepared to throw.

So if he stood from his throne, Frigg knew it was all over.

However, something strange happened.

"…?"

Odin looked down at his own palm.

He had noticed some strange static running through his entire body.

"Wh-what is this? Someone is interfering with my very existence!?"

With a staticky racket, the muscular male god with an eyepatch and long beard vanished.

In his place, a short girl with wavy blonde hair, a witch-like hat, and a cape sat in Hliðskjálf.

The only thing left unchanged was the eyepatch and Frigg gasped when she saw this "goddess".

"Are you *Othinus*!?"

"You sure are rude. Is a mere god really going to refer to me without some kind of respectful title?"

This girl was another form of Odin and distortion filled her voice.

Static frequently ran through her entire being and the muscular male god and the witch-like goddess switched back and forth again and again.

The girl forced herself back into being and sat down in the throne.

Frigg chose her words carefully.

"After all this, what could you possibly want?"

"Ha ha. 'After all this'? I don't care about this place. Just like that bearded guy, I can't stand to just watch on any longer. Of course, what I'm doing is stopping him from doing anything."

Othinus placed an arm on the armrest and gently placed her clenched fist against her cheek.

“I’m just buying time before that war-obsessed god can throw his spear. I had to force my way over here, so it probably won’t last longer than a few minutes or even a few seconds, but even a little bit can change things.”

“Are you saying they have a way of fighting what a god…what the one standing at the peak of heaven has determined?”

“Of course they do. That boy clenching his fist may have a stupid look on his face, but he’s the one who once saved the god you’re talking to now.”

Part 14

Index raised her head while still holding down her cape.

“This is bad… This is bad, Touma!! It seems Odin has started to act. Once he joins in, he’ll throw Gungnir and that will destroy everything we’ve built up here!!”

“Gung…nir?”

Kamijou Touma gulped, but not because he did not understand.

He had once challenged a different god who had truly possessed Gungnir.

“It’s going to fall from the heavens at any time. It’ll probably target Hel, but I doubt we’ll be safe. If we’re caught in the explosion, I’m not sure your right hand can stop it.”

“There’s still a way,” said Mikoto.

A moment later, the ground quickly froze over. This was the work of the Yuki Onna who could literally achieve absolute zero. The frozen patch of ground was a meter wide and extended beyond the horizon. A streamlined box that resembled a bobsleigh floated above the rail of ice.

“If this mess has a diameter of eighty kilometers it means we’re forty from the center, right? With low-temperature superconductivity and my high-voltage current, we can rocket there using the theory behind a linear motor train. I don’t know where this spear or whatever is going to fall, but you should be able to stop it since you can restrain my power. So leave the rest to me.”

“That means…”

Everyone focused on a single point.

The twintailed queen who had overturned everything was smiling calmly.

Quenser toyed with an additional explosive in his hand.

“We have to stop her, even if it’s just for an instant!!”

Everyone but Kamijou and Mikoto rushed forward, but the queen’s expression remained unchanged.

“How many times…”

She smiled as assault rifle bullets rained down on her.

“Must I tell you…”

She grabbed the Killer Queen’s neck with one arm.

“You stand no chance…”

She grabbed the bunny girls’ neck with the other arm.

“Before…”

Every part of her white clothing writhed about and countless weapons such as swords, spears, and axes shot out.

“You get it?”

Her attacks seemed to explode out in every direction. The color white destroyed any and all materials.

“Touma, hurry up and go! If Odin ends this, we can’t save anyone! So…!!”

“Dammit!!”

Kamijou clenched his teeth aboard the bobsleigh-like box, but the floating device lurched downwards.

But this was not due to Imagine Breaker.

The Yuki Onna who had created the ice rail and the bobsleigh box had been skewered in countless places by white weapons, so she could not maintain her power.

They could not make it in time.

They could not arrive in time.

“It’s no use,” groaned Kamijou.

Even further back than the queen, he saw an orange light fall in a straight line from heaven. The twintailed queen's elegant smile did not move a millimeter. She must have been confident she and the summoner could survive even if the world came to an end.

But that was not true of everyone.

If that reached the surface and filled everything with destruction, there was no saving Kamijou's group. And it went without saying what would happen to Hel who was being directly targeted.

Yet there was nothing they could do.

The queen's wall was absolute. They knew the danger, but they could not reach the spear.

The boy's right hand flailed through empty space.

"Noooooo

With an ear-splitting sound, a single palm stood in the way of Gungnir.

♦

“I can’t believe it.”

Waltraute’s eyes opened wide on Bifröst.

The owner of that right hand was not Kamijou Touma.

The power that had stopped it was not Imagine Breaker.

Even Loki stared in disbelief at the massive light on the surface.

“What is this? That’s…that’s the boy who committed suicide earlier, isn’t it!? How did he come back to life!?”

“More importantly, isn’t that the power of Baldr?” asked Brynhildr. “It’s said that god of light can deflect any attack and not even Odin can harm him, but I thought he had already died in one of Loki’s schemes. …No, wait. He died? And went to the underworld?”

“That’s right,” said Waltraute in a trembling voice. “That boy did not kill himself because he could not take the pain and suffering. He intentionally ended his own life to take a trip to the underworld and borrow the power of the god of light imprisoned there!! And he made sure to use a method that would send him to Niflheim and not Asgard!!”

♦

A little earlier, the boy (technically, just his soul) arrived in Niflheim, that white world of snow and ice.

Normally, the great guard dog Garmr would manage the souls of the dead like a sheepdog, but his master, Hel, had left and her role as queen of the underworld was gone.

To help Hel, Garmr had guided the boy’s soul to the ice palace of Éljúðnir.

Deep, deep, deep inside was a room that resembled a luxurious prison cell more than a guest room and a young man waited there.

He was Baldr.

His death had been prophesied shortly after his birth, so a contract had been made to ensure no objects, phenomena, or life forms could harm him. The one exception was mistletoe which had been considered too young to kill him, but Loki had killed him using a spear of mistletoe and Höðr, Baldr’s blind brother.

Even so, it was prophesied he would be resurrected like a phoenix from the rubble left over after Ragnarök where he would rule over the new world.

“Oh? You don’t see this every day.”

Baldr emitted light as he welcomed the human boy.

“Things are quiet outside and the sin filling Niflheim has vanished. …I suppose Hel has finally run out of patience.”

“Are you Lord Baldr?”

“I am. But let me be clear about something: don’t expect much from me. I’m praised as the god of light, but I wasn’t able to do much of anything before I was killed in one of Loki’s schemes. My brother Höðr was set up as the murderer, so he was killed for my death. I couldn’t save anyone and even led to my twin brother’s death, so don’t assume I can live up to any of your expectations.”

“Nn!”

“You don’t like it? But my voice will not reach Hel. If I was truly a god of light, Niflheim’s darkness would have been dispersed much sooner, but I could not even accomplish that. Hel has gone, hasn’t she? What more proof could you need?”

This god had been unable to save anyone.

He had been the cause of his blood-related brother’s death.

That may have been why he ended up in the underworld after dying. He may have sealed himself in the depths of the earth out of shame for what he viewed as his greatest sin.

But…

“That’s not a reason.”

“For what?”

“I’m saying that’s not a reason to give up on Hel!!” declared the boy. “She wasn’t listening to you, but that’s no reason for you to stop speaking to her. She didn’t want to be saved, but that’s no reason to stop reaching out to her! If you give up here and everyone lets go, she’ll be left all alone. She’ll lose her way out!! I can’t let that happen. You were trying to call out to her because you understood that, right!?”

“…”

That god emitted his own light, yet something seemed to dazzle him.

But the boy did not notice.

“I want to save her, I want to see her smile, and I want to play with her! So help me. It doesn’t matter if she wants it or not!! Lend me your power to open up a whole list of options before she reaches a dead end with no way back!! Then we can let her choose again what path to take! *I need your power*!!”

“Fine then.”

That was all Baldr said.

He saw this puny boy as an equal, so he held out his right hand for handshake.

“Let’s save her. First, you need to return to the surface. …I am the god of light, so I will protect you as long as something shines in your heart.”

Part 16

Intense light surged from the boy’s palm.

That was the light of Baldr, who was supposedly impossible to kill by any means.

Not even Odin’s Gungnir was an exception.

The boy thrust his small hand upward and Gungnir struck it. The spear bent like a fishing rod and the released power blasted the spear in a different direction. It had failed to hit Hel, but it had another target: the black tree swirling around her. It spread destruction as if to ensure it at least accomplished that.

It all happened in an instant.

The great black vortex measured eighty kilometers across, but it was smashed to pieces like a popped balloon. This also eliminated the individuals called in by the blackness.

However, that was all the spear could accomplish.

It always returned to the one who threw it, so it returned to the heavenly world like a boomerang.

The shadow at the boy’s feet grew unnaturally.

Eventually, the shadow took a form made up of white shining light.

“Father truly is amazing!!” shouted the white shadow before the spear could be thrown a second time. “I, Baldr, saw it with my own eyes!! Washing mankind clean of its sins and saving Hel from her own rampage is truly the great accomplish of a true head god!! I can see now that only Odin could stand at the peak of the gods. And by saving Hel, he has proven that she is not another head god and that she must be ranked below him!!”

♦

“Nhhh!!”

Odin grumbled as he grabbed Gungnir in one hand when it flew in from empty space.

That comment prevented him from finishing off Hel.

It was a complete coincidence that he had blown away the sin without killing Hel (or so he thought since he did not realize he had been set up), but if he threw his spear again, he would be ruining that unexpected accomplishment.

♦

“Ah…”

Hel looked up at the light.

It took the form of a boy on a giant dragon’s back.

She had assumed no help was coming.

The boy riding Níðhöggr slowly descended toward the ground.

The light was now within her reach.

She had assumed saving her would sacrifice the souls of so many humans.

Who was she at this moment?

Was she the queen of the underworld or another head god and savior of the world?

Most likely, she was neither.

As she stared blankly up at the sky, she was surely nothing more than a girl.

She had assumed her resolve had been smashed by the boy’s death.

And yet…

And yet…

And yet…

“It’s okay now, Hel. It’s all over, so let’s get back to the others.”

No fancy words were needed.

No strict announcement of capitulation or end of hostilities was needed.

“Sure.”

She looked up toward heaven.

She hesitantly reached out and embraced the boy who descended from the black dragon.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Hel wept like a normal girl.

And that signaled the end of a battle that would have brought the end of the world.

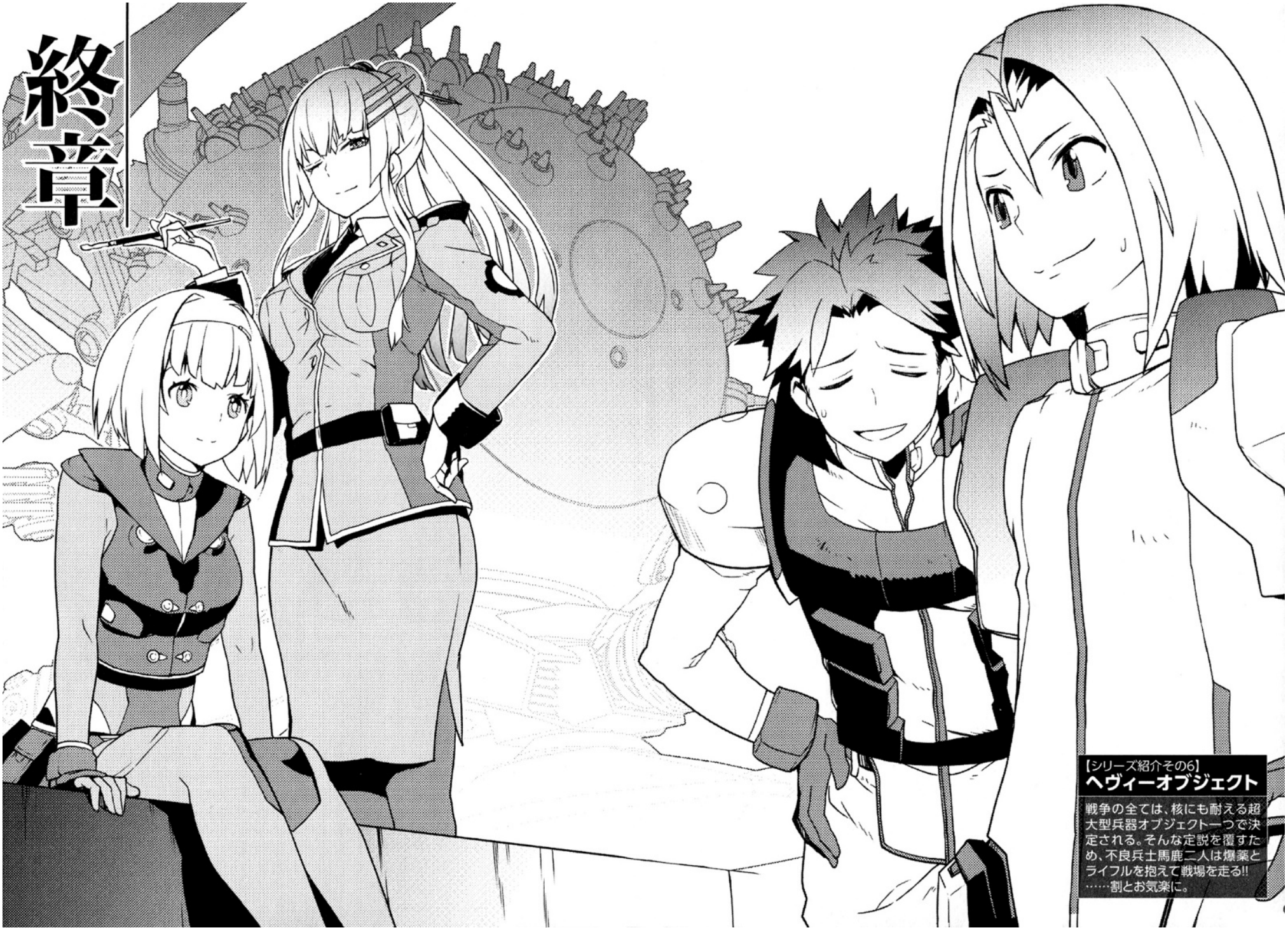
EPILOGUE

[Series Introduction 6]

Heavy Object

All wars are determined by the colossal weapons known as Objects that can withstand nuclear weapons. But two stupid delinquent soldiers run around with explosives and rifles to overturn that established rule!! …And they seem rather carefree about it.

終章



【シリーズ紹介その6】
ヘヴィーオブジェクト

戦争の全ては、核にも耐える超大型兵器オブジェクト一つで決定される。そんな定説を覆すため、不良兵士馬鹿二人は爆薬とライフルを抱えて戦場を走る!!
……割とお気楽に。

At an unknown time and in an unknown place, Waltraute confronted a certain god: Light God Baldr.

“Lady Frigg is wondering if you will return to Asgard.”

“Mother, hm? No, it would be best if she spent some time away from her son. After all, it only took seeing my death in a dream for her to call in every object, phenomenon, and life form and yell at them to never harm me.”

Invulnerable Baldr could deflect any attack, but that was why. It made him look like he had a mother complex or an overly-protective mother, so he could not exactly brag about the skill.

“And if I had resurrected myself there, I would have needed to use the boy as a stepping stone. The god of light will not ascend to heaven by abandoning a human seeking salvation. That’s the kind of god I want to be.”

“I suppose I should thank you for that. Normally, a human who stabbed his own throat would never come back to life.”

“I need to thank him. It was undoubtedly his actions that allowed me to remember my position as god of light.”

“Is that why you’re doing this?”

“Well, I’m sure Niflheim will become something else entirely now that is has been cleansed of human sin, but if Odin doesn’t change his ways, the underworld will quickly fill back up with human souls sent there for false sins. …Someone will need to monitor Hel’s progress. And that got me to thinking. The god of light…no, light itself is meant to illuminate the darkness. There wa nothing for me to do in Asgard which is already full of light. I’ve found somewhere I want to shine my light on, so I won’t return until I’ve saved Niflheim.”

Baldr smiled a little.

Waltraute maintained her usual sour look and did not smile, but her attitude did soften.

“I still can’t believe that boy took his own life to pass between worlds and talk directly with a god.”

“I agree with you there. I need to give him a talking to later. Whatever the reason, I can’t let him glorify the act of suicide.”

♦

Kamijou and the others gathered back on the Divine Ship Skíðblaðnir.

The Hel ordeal was over and they had a way back home.

“Now that it’s over, it all feels too short.”

Heivia reluctantly looked back to the land.

“We never did run across a long-eared elf bathing, did we? Well, a lot happened and we almost died, but it wasn’t a bad vacation.”

“Agreed,” said Quenser, sounding exhausted. “But that last person who was summoned was something else. I never want to run across someone like that again. It isn’t normal to make the Princess dizzy when she’s inside her Object.”

Jinnai Shinobu was running around trying to escape the Yuki Onna.

“Heh heh heh. Eh heh heh heh heh. I know you feel like you missed out. You were lonely frozen all on your own, weren’t you? So this time, I’ll freeze both of us together. That way, I’ll never, eeeever let you feel lonely again.”

“No! Nooo!! Have your traits as a Youkai been strengthened because we’re in some fantasy world!? And why is being a yandere a trait of your entire species!?”

Incidentally, the leaf swimsuit Zashiki Warashi showed no sign of helping the resident of her house. She was staring off into the distance but not because she was reminiscing. She was only thinking about how she could eat normal bread and soba again soon.

Meanwhile, college student Anzai Kyousuke sat on the far-too-large deck.

“Sigh. So our adventure with the Absurd is finally at its end.”

“By the way, bunny girl, will you be okay when we get back? Weren’t you already-…”

“Not to worry. Some things are just meant to happen in life. …And let me warn you that you should never let your guard down and assume I’ve completely vanished from the world.”

Nanajou Kyouichirou and Satsuki were having a conversation of their own.

“Y’know, I think I’d rather stay here forever if the alternative is going back to that world filled with killers.”

“While this world doesn’t have very many killers, it does seem to have a lot of war and famine. Maybe they all have to work so hard to survive that they don’t have time for intelligent bloodlust.”

The entire plain-sized ship began to glow faintly.

Kamijou paid careful attention to where he put his right hand so as not to negate it by accident.

“Well, I’m glad this isn’t going to leave a bad taste in our mouths. That alone I can agree with.”

“There’s a lot I’m still curious about, but it may be better for both worlds if I don’t bring back the knowledge here.”

“I’m more curious about how much time will have passed when we get back. It’s been a week. A whole week. Do you think maybe time will revert to when we vanished?”

Seeing them off from the land were Waltraute on her white horse, the boy sitting in front of her, and Hel on Níðhöggr.

Kamijou waved to them.

The change continued and the scenery before them blurred. Or perhaps it was their existence that was fading.

This was the end.

Everything was breaking apart around them, but Kamijou Touma’s voice still got through strangely clear.

“See you again somewhere and sometime.”

With a flash, several lights scattered in several directions and surpassed the boundaries of that world.

A.E.02: This is No Time to be Getting Excited about Swimsuits 2.0

[Series Introduction 7]

The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage

A boy falls in love with Waltraute the Valkyrie and Waltraute is dragged around by that boy. That should have been all it was, but the next thing she knows, she is frying Odin and destroying Ragnarök.

【シリーズ紹介その7】
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情

戦乙女のヴァルトラウテに惚れた少年と、そんな少年に振り回されるヴァルトラウテ。ただそれだけなのに、気がつけばオーディンを黒焦げにし、ラグナロクまで蹴散らして……？

Part 1

However, they were unable to return home.

Part 2

"……"

Kamijou Touma, Index, Misaka Mikoto, Quenser Barbotage, Heivia Winchell, Milinda Brantini (aboard the Object), Jinnai Shinobu, Zashiki Warashi Yukari, the Yuki Onna, Anzai Kyousuke, Higashikawa Mamoru, Bunny Girl Karen, Nanajou Kyouichirou, and Satsuki all stood in complete silence on the Divine Ship Skíðblaðnir's deck.

After so confidently declaring they were going home, here they still were.

Their surroundings had seemed to blur, but they found themselves standing in the exact same place again. A few hours seemed to have passed, Waltraute and Hel were gone, and the absence of the previous heat left them feeling even colder about being stranded here.

It was the same feeling as waiting to scare some people during a test of courage, but having no one walk down the path and realizing you had been left all alone in a haunted area.

The search for the culprit soon began.

"Is this what I think it is?" asked the Zashiki Warashi. "Did one of us want to have some more fun and didn't want to go back, so they ended up shutting down the entire process?"

"You mean someone is keeping us from going back?" asked an enraged Misaka Mikoto. "Well!? I don't really get what's going on, but boys!! I'm sure it was you as gave us dirty looks!!"

"What!? Wouldn't it be you girls who don't want to go back? After all, you'll be thrown out in the streets wearing nothing but your bikini armor!!"

"And whose fault is that!? I'll fry you!!"

Starting with Mikoto and Heivia, sparks flew between the girls and boys.

The only one they could rely on here was their big brother in spirit, Kamijou Touma.

“C-calm down,” said the gentleman. “We all want to get back home, so instead of fighting, we should try working togeth-…”

“Shut up!! Let’s attack him first!!!!!!” the rest shouted.

After they created a great cloud of dust filled with flying star marks, they stood around the pointy-haired idiot who could only crawl along the deck with his clothes about to fall off.

“I-I really think this treatment is unacceptable…”

No one listened to what the bastard said.

“Anyway, if we don’t solve this problem quickly, we might be stuck here forever!” (Index)

“Quit trying to take the reasonable side!! I hate when people try to stay so pure! You’re so full of yourself!!” (Anzai Kyousuke)

“I don’t like how heated up you get. Should I cool you down?” (Yuki Onna)

“Um, is it just me or are all of you so preoccupied with finding the culprit that you don’t care about getting back to our worlds?” (Bunny Girl)

“I’ve never liked this place! It’s supposed to be a legit fantasy world, but there’s no sigh of a nude Witches’ Sabbath or a cursed swimsuit that makes any girl who wears it horny!!” (Quenser)

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re trying to say, but I can assume you’re saying you want me to kill you, can’t I?” (Satsuki)

The second round began.

Some might wonder which side would win in a serious conflict, but generally, the girls were far stronger. If the boys could be seen as a pawn with a chance to be promoted, the girls were all rooks and bishops.

They might have been able to strike at the weaknesses of any one of the girls, but there was nothing they could do when an Object, some Youkai, a Level 5, and a Killer Queen all attacked at once.

And after thirty seconds, all of the boys were forced to crawl along the deck with their clothes about to fall off.

“Wh-why don’t you get that no one wants to see this!? This is where the armor is supposed to break for a nice illustration!!”

“And all of you are too powerful!! Did you create an angry beauty barrier or something!?”

The victors were not about to listen to the complaints of the pummeled ones.

The girls began planning while looking down on the boys as if they were dung beetles.

“So what should we do now?”

“Hmm. Whether intentionally or not, I think someone is interfering with the process to take us home.”

“In other words, we can get back if we slaughter all of the despicable guys?”

“Starting with all of them would be too cruel. How about we kill them one by one and see when the sparkling transportation effect comes back?”

They were about to see firsthand how executions were used as public entertainment in Medieval Europe, but something stopped them.

Or rather, a bigger problem fell on top of them.

Waltraute, the fourth Valkyrie sister, and Hel, queen of the underworld and second head god, crashed down like a shooting star while tearing at each other’s hair and clothes.

“Gwooooooohhhhhhhh!! Just give up already, you damn thief!! I already know you took that boy down into the underworrrrrrrllllllllld!!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!? I know you’re the one that dragged him up to the heavenly world, you murderrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

The others had no idea what these two were talking about, but fortunately, their collision with the deck did not create a giant crater in it.

Instead, they tore up the ground like a plane making an emergency landing and they slid toward the others.

“Um, I think this is bad news. A fight between people on the level of gods isn’t the kind of Absurdity you run into every day!”

“Aren’t they on a complete collision course!? G-get out of the way! Everyone get to the left and right!!”

On Mikoto’s instructions, Index, Satsuki, and the other girls scrambled away.

And like bowling pins, the pummeled boys were sent flying into the air.

But the goddesses paid that tragedy no heed.

“Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die!!”

“Do you want to try starting Ragnarök again!? Well, do you!?”

In this battle of gods, they teleported from point to point and the shockwaves of their clashes arrived after a short delay, but then Index muttered something.

“Hmm. I think maybe we weren’t the cause. These rampaging gods may have destroyed the laws of this world. With polytheism, each god is essentially assigned part of the world’s formula.”

“I-Index, you just said something really important. …That means you attacked us for no reason, you perverted nude cape girrrrrrrllllllllllllllll!!”

History was written by the victors, so Index and the other girls did not listen to their complaints.

More importantly, the proper resolution was rolling around in front of them.

“So if we stop their fight, we can get back to Academy City?”

“There might be more than one cause, but a fight between a Valkyrie and the second head god is undoubtedly one reason. So either way, we need to stop them.”

“Um, does that mean we’ll have to step in between two furious goddesses? It looks to me like they’re about to start using some ridiculous overpowered attacks that directly destroy each other’s existence.”

It was not often that the bunny girl looked like she wanted to run away, but that just showed how dangerous the situation was.

So the gentleman known as Kamijou Touma gave his own suggestion.

“Why do all of you assume it has to come to a fight!?”

“I don’t want to hear that from the guy who immediately clenches his fist when faced with any kind of problem!!”

“No, the key to a battle is the speech!! So, Waltraute, Hel! What happened? If you like, you can discuss it with Kamijou Touma, the boy who ended World War Thr-…”

“Shut up, you worm!! Get in my way and I’ll kill you first!!!!!!”

“Shut up, you worm!! Get in my way and I’ll kill you first!!!!!!”

The boy was left with his clothes in an even more precarious position.

No one wanted that, so they were fortunately just barely hanging on.

“Bh…bfh. Bghbfh…”

“You really are stupid. This is what happens when you try to judge a raging god by human standards. You should count yourself lucky that you aren’t suffering from a strange fever brought on by divine punishment.”

However, the goddesses seemed to feel a little guilty for attacking a normal person on pure momentum, so they cooled down some.

“T-Touma sacrificed himself for us…”

“You’re just saying something that sounds meaningful to distract us from what happened before that, aren’t you!? If this is how this world works, I feel sorry for the people who live here!!”

Waltraute and Hel had cooled their heads enough to hold a conversation, so they explained the situation.

Apparently, the small boy who was always with Waltraute had vanished.

“I got some help from Hliðskjálf, the throne that lets you see across all nine worlds, and the Norns, the three goddesses who make unchangeable prophecies. Those goddesses have even seen the result of Ragnarök, but not even they know where that boy is. That means he must be in the underworld where the power of the gods doesn’t reach!!” (Waltraute)

“Yes, but Niflheim contains the villa of the priestess spirit that even Odin bowed down to and asked to prophesy for him! And she claims that boy isn’t anywhere in the nine worlds! I can only imagine the gods are using their greater spiritual power to jam the priestess!!” (Hel)

The goddesses pointed at each other and pleaded their case to the audience.

Jinnai Shinobu finally recovered and got up.

“So you’re talking about that kid who’s always grabbing onto your waist? He seems a lot like me, so do you think maybe he got caught up in some trouble related to something non-human?”

“Uuh!? Th-that isn’t it!!”

“But you can see the entire world using the prophecies and viewing devices in the heavenly world and the underworld, so I’d think you would find him if he had been abducted by someone or just gotten lost.”

Index tilted her head as she spoke, but the goddesses jabbed each other’s cheeks with their extended pointer fingers.

“Weren’t you listening!? She’s clearly lying!!!!!”

“Weren’t you listening!? She’s clearly lying!!!!!”

The Zashiki Warashi and Yuki Onna both sighed.

“Does everyone turn into an idiot when they become a god?”

“If so, I want to stay a mere Youkai forever.”

A step away, the bunny girl observed them even more lukewarmly.

“(Well, it’s always the ones who say that that end up going three times as far when the same thing happens to them.)”

At any rate, it seemed they had to do something about the boy who had suddenly vanished, so Mikoto looked back and forth between Waltraute and Hel.

“Um, if we’re assuming one or both of you are lying, how about we try that ‘compare their stories to find the truth!’ thing?”

“Will that really work under the rules of the gods?” asked an amazed Satsuki. “To me, it seems like anything goes with them.”

It seemed unlikely to work, but they could only search for a hint from what the two goddesses had said.

“I got some help from Hliðskjálf, the throne that lets you see across all nine worlds, and the Norns, the three goddesses who make unchangeable prophecies. Those goddesses have even seen the result of Ragnarök, but not even they know where that boy is. That means he must be in the underworld where the power of the gods doesn’t reach!!” (Waltraute)

“Yes, but Niflheim contains the villa of the priestess spirit that even Odin bowed down to and asked to prophesy for him! And she claims that boy isn’t anywhere in the nine worlds! I can only imagine the gods are using their greater spiritual power to jam the priestess!!” (Hel)

Satsuki held her head in her hands because there were a few things she still did not understand.

“Um… What even are the nine worlds anyway?”

“Well, this entire Norse world is supported by the World Tree Yggdrasil. The nine worlds exist on its roots, around its trunk, or at the end of its branches and altogether they form the Norse world.”

“To name them, there is the heavenly world of Asgard, the giant god’s world of Vanaheimr, the human world of Midgard, the underworld of Niflheim, the giant’s world of Jötunheimr, the elf world of Alfheimr, the dark elf world of Svartálfheimr, the underground world of Niðavellir, and the fire world of Muspelheim. Odin and the other gods rule them all, but Surtr and I have essentially hacked in and overwritten some of them with our own rules.”

“That’s why the power of the gods wouldn’t be able to find the boy if he was hidden in Niflheim or Muspelheim! Because they’ve hacked them!!”

“What!? You gods are the ones who rule the nine worlds, so you’re the first ones to suspect when someone goes missing there!! This is like having to worry about a global corporation’s authorized spyware!!”

“I’ll kill you, you thief!!”

“Shut up, you old wife!!”

The goddesses started heating up again, so Index threw Kamijou Touma between them. At this point, it was a miracle his clothes were still hanging onto him.

After the goddesses calmed back down, Quenser suddenly realized something.

“Hm? So you can only use your power inside those nine fields? That’s like having a set range for your spy satellite.”

“Only inside? But that’s everything.”

“But…”

He pointed in a certain direction.

He pointed off of Skíðblaðnir but not toward the land.

In other words…

“Based on what you said, wouldn’t he be in the ocean?”

Part 3

The situation led to an inevitable change.

Yes.

If they had to search the ocean for the little boy, they all had to change into swimsuits!!!!

Index → Equipped: School Swimsuit (White)

Misaka Mikoto → Equipped: Racing Swimsuit (Black)

Zashiki Warashi Yukari → Equipped: Bikini (Red)

Yuki Onna → Equipped: School Swimsuit (Blue)

Bunny Girl → Equipped: One Piece (Purple)

Satsuki → Equipped: Monokini (Yellow)

Waltraute → Equipped: Dressmaker (Pink)

Hel → Equipped: Two Piece (Green)

Normally, a change to swimsuits would be a wonderful reward, but tragically, the swimsuits actually looked more normal than what they had been wearing before.

But regardless, the girls sent a rush of complaints Waltraute's way.

What even was a dressmaker anyway?

Mikoto got things started.

"Hey, what kind of old lady terminology is that?"

"I-I am not an old lady!! That isn't quite the right genre!!"

"And why is the oldest one of us wearing a pink one piece with a short frilly skirt!? That's the kind of swimsuit a parent buys their kid and makes them wear, isn't it!?"

"We do not have this kind of clothing in our world, so I have no idea what is right and what isn't."

"Teacher, since you mentioned it, I don't know the different between a bikini and a two piece. Both of them show off the navel, don't they?"

“Shut up, old lady #2. A bikini is held together by strings while a two piece has cloth around the shoulders and back like a tank top. In other words, a two piece is a large category and you get a bikini by removing more cloth and making it more revealing. Got it?”

“And a monokini is?”

“From the front, it looks like a one piece, but from the back it looks like a bikini. I guess it has a nude apron kind of effect.”

“Um, and a school swimsuit and a racing-…”

“No matter how I explain those, someone’s sure to argue against my definition as passionately as a religious debate, so search for the answer at your own risk.”

There was no explanation for the boys. None was needed.

At any rate, they had finished equipping their new outfits.

“Okay, now we need to search for that boy. If he’s in the ocean, a certain someone’s home would be my first guess.”

“Oh? Does Norse mythology have something like Ryugu-jo?”

The generally immortal Zashiki Warashi seemed carefree enough, but Jinnai Shinobu grew pale next to her.

“Um…if we’re going to some place on the bottom of the ocean…”

“Yes?”

“How exactly are we going to get there?”

In her frilly skirt swimsuit, Waltraute jerked her thumb back toward the ocean and sounded like she was announcing their execution.

“We dive, of course.”

Part 4

The nine worlds of Norse mythology were said to have been created from the corpse of a giant named Ymir.

The ocean was no exception as it was supposedly made from Ymir’s blood.

The massive ocean that surrounded the entire Norse world was ruled by a sea god named Ægir.

And a certain goddess was his wife: Rán.

While Ægir was the ruler of peaceful seas, Rán was the ruler of especially stormy seas. She would use her large net to capture humans who were thrown out into the ocean and drag them down to the bottom. That may paint the picture of an evil god that devoured human souls, but she only dragged down the souls she took a liking to and she gave them a special reception in her undersea palace.

In a way, she may have been something like an extremely predatory Otohime.

Although, she was still a wife.

"Fish!"

A small boy raised his hands in joy in the undersea palace ruled by that sea goddess.

"Wow!! There's so many fish!!"

Despite being called a palace, it was several dozen kilometers across, so it could be seen as a tenth world that was not contained by any of the other nine. It also helped indicate the scale of what people in the Norse civilization thought of as a "world".

A transparent dome covered the entire palace with room to spare and it also protected several other buildings built from piles of massive carved stones. The overall size was easily one hundred kilometers across. The level of technology could be seen in the decorative waterways built along the stone-paved roads despite having gone to the trouble of holding back all of the seawater.

A tall woman stood next to the boy.

She had white skin and black hair cut to shoulder length. She wore a long dress so thin that any kind of backlight revealed her bodyline below and some accessories made from shells adorned her hair and wrists.

"What kind of fish is that?"

"A striped beakfish."

"It's so shiny and cool. …Voom voom! And it's fast!!"

"It is delectable when grilled."

"It'd be sad to eat it, so no thanks."

In this Norse world, falling from a boat in your clothes was a death sentence for anyone but the most well-trained warrior. While being less technologically advanced than the gods, the humans had named themselves Vikings and used extremely well-made high speed ships, but they did not do much to polish their personal swimming skills.

That gave them very few chances to see the fish who swam freely through the sea.

With that in mind, it was not surprising that the boy was in high spirits.

“I never knew the ocean was so pretty. I thought it was a scary place.”

“You weren’t wrong to think that. The ocean is the mouth of death. The question is whether you have the technology needed to overcome it.”

“I want to show this to Waltraute. And to my parents.”

“…”

“I can’t? Is this a secret place?”

“No, the ocean is open to anyone. The boundaries between worlds and the head god’s rule do not reach us. Still, I doubt may people would want to come here.”

“What are you talking about? Everyone would love to see somewhere this pretty!”

Rán narrowed her eyes and gently rubbed the boy’s head.

“Can I come here again, Rán?”

“Again?”

“I need to get back home or my parents will be mad.”

“…” She fell silent again.

Her expression barely changed, but she looked somewhat troubled.

“What is it?”

“I am sorry, but I think you need to stay here for the time being.”

“Okay! I’ll go tell my parents!”

“…”

“I can’t even do that?”

“Soon.”

Finally, she spoke while looking down at the small boy.

“Soon, the sea will bare its fangs. The mouth of death swallows all. This is a mutation that not even the Norns were able to predict, but I doubt there is any changing the flow of events now. You and the heroes from foreign worlds smashed the plans of the second head god, so no one in this Norse world can stop you.”

“Rán?”

“So you must stay here until the calamity of the mouth of death has passed. I am Rán, queen of the king who protects the tenth location which is not contained in the nine worlds. But while I will escape Ragnarök, I have been stripped of the right to influence major events such as Ragnarök.”

The boy did not understand the workings of the gods.

He did not know what she was specifically referring to when she said the sea was the mouth of death, when she said it would bare its fangs, or when she said it would swallow all.

But…

“Rán, if everyone’s in trouble, you have to tell them!”

“…”

“Rán! Can’t we have Waltraute and everyone else escape to here!?”

“…”

Rán could only give him a troubled look.

He had not realized that she could not influence the general path of history. Even if she knew of the coming destruction, she had no way of stopping it. She could only use her power on the branches where it would not affect the trunk.

She could not even speak a single word.

She could not get out the words she truly wanted to say.

If those words would influence any major events, she was forbidden to even open her mouth.

"…"

So this was all she could do.

She could only protect people with methods that did not change history in any obvious way.

But…

(Here they come.)

Without speaking a word, she looked away from the boy and straight up.

A massive transparent dome protected the palace and the surrounding buildings with room to spare.

And now, the Divine Ship Skíðblaðnir dropped straight down to break through the very top of it.

(I cannot directly influence history.)

As she listened to the shattering of the tenth world she controlled, Rán gave a silent, thin smile.

(But if the branches I move manage to drag along the gods and the foreigners who overpowered them…!!)

Surely, something would change.

However, the sea goddess might be swallowed up and destroyed by that very torrent of change.

Part 5

"So that's what's going on."

Loki, the man known as an evil god, leaned up against a stone wall in Asgard and faced the giant wolf named Fenrir.

Fenrir could be seen as his child, his greatest masterpiece, or his anti-god weapon.

"I am more sensitive to most when it comes to this world's destruction. It comes with how I was created. So there is no mistaking it."

“The sea is the boundary between worlds. It surrounds our territory and possesses the power that separates us from the truly foreign.”

The Norse world was composed of Yggdrasil and the nine worlds, so it had an extremely simple structure.

It was just one continent with the world tree at the center. After that, there were only the various worlds at the end of the roots and branches.

Then where was the sea?

That was simple: it surrounded that one continent. Or more accurately, it was a massive ocean with a continent floating in it.

“That is why Odin can’t retrieve the souls of the humans who die at sea. The sea is the mouth of death, but that is because the people it swallows are dragged into the truly foreign. Sea Goddess Rán is the one acting to prevent that.”

“You are the one who summoned those heroes from truly foreign worlds. Did you not know what would happen if they decided they wanted to go home and tried to connect to those truly foreign worlds once more?”

“Oh, c’mon. I’m the evil god who tried to change the outcome of Ragnarök. That was enough to satisfy me. Do you really think I had predicted what would happen after the battle?”

“…”

“But in a way, I suppose this could be used to overturn Ragnarök,” spat out Loki. “What lies beyond the sea? And I’m not talking about simply circumnavigating the world. I’m talking about ignoring the three-dimensional vectors and connecting to the truly foreign. The sea divides the worlds, but there may be a similarly great ocean on the other side of that invisible boundary.”

“So they came here just fine, but repeatedly opening holes in such a short period of time could break the valve and the other ocean could pour into this world.”

One only had to think about it.

A Certain Magical Index.

Heavy Object.

The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village.

A Simple Series.

They had all come from a planet named earth, but all of those earths were likely different. And what would happen if a total of five truly foreign oceans were gathered in one place? The effect would be greater than fully melting the South Pole of the planet earth. Even fleeing to the tallest mountain peak would not save one from the mouth of death.

In other words…

“An extreme rise in the ocean level. The mouth of death swallows all, hm?”

“You aren’t assuming you’re fine because you live in the heavenly world above the clouds, are you?”

“I’m not. All nine worlds are protected by Yggdrasil. If it withers away, everything comes tumbling down and I doubt Asgard is an exception.”

The world’s only land would be entirely lost and the mouth of death would devour humans, gods, and every other race alike.

“This will be just like when Odin created the nine worlds and drowned every last one of Surtr’s giant ancestors with a great flood. But this time, no one will survive. The massive amount of seawater flowing in from the truly foreign will easily ignore our world’s capacity. It’s possible it might even directly submerge the heavenly world.”

“Sea King Ægir and his queen, Rán, will survive.”

“But they cannot influence history, so their descendants will be unable to repopulate the land. We can’t expect them to copy Odin.”

“Hm.” Loki brought a hand to his chin. “I do want to change the outcome of Ragnarök, but I also want to make a more beautiful ending than the one Odin’s imagining. The mouth of death falls short on that front.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Influence things. But they will be the ones to make the final decision.”

This had to do with the worlds beyond the nine of Norse mythology, so the choice naturally went to the strangers and not the gods.

“Will they return to their truly foreign worlds or will they stay here? They have two simple options.”

Part 6

Even after the dome was destroyed, the undersea palace was not immediately inundated with seawater. This was of course a life-or-death issue, so several layers of countermeasures had been built in to handle unforeseen circumstances.

And just such an unforeseen circumstance had occurred.

Skíðblaðnir fell straight down and stood tall like a pillar instead of collapsing or breaking apart.

Wearing her pink swimsuit with a frilly skirt and already in furious mode, Waltraute raised a Spear of Destroying Lightning, ran across the vertical deck, and approached from directly above Rán.

“I’ll kill you, you kidnapping old hag!!!!!”

“…”

Meanwhile, a harsh look filled Rán’s eyes.

That was all it took for seawater to surge from the waterways behind her, swirl around, and form two giant arms of water.

According to legend, Rán had two weapons.

The first was powerful arms that could grab and capsize any ship.

The second was a magical net that could capture a drowning soul with 100% accuracy.

Therefore…

“Wha-…?”

As soon as Rán threw her net, it bound Waltraute’s body as tightly as fishnet tights.

Before she lost her balance in midair, something else happened.

Those arms of water could grab and capsize any ship, so they grabbed Skíðblaðnir and mercilessly hit a homerun with Waltraute as the ball.

A ridiculous explosive sound filled the area as the several dozen kilometer structure sent Waltraute crashing through stone building after stone building.

As Kamijou Touma and Jinnai Shinobu wondered how they were going to get down while bracing themselves inside the ship, they fell here and there like an exploding bag of chips.

The little boy shouted out as he watched on from the side.

“Rán!! Don’t do that!!”

“…”

But the sea goddess did not answer.

No, she *could not* answer.

“Talk about an exciting welcome.”

A voice came from overhead.

Above Rán, the queen of Niflheim struck a daunting pose with her arms crossed.

“But even if I lost the black world tree, don’t think you can take out the second head god!!”

“…”

Rán rested Skíðblaðnir on her shoulder and stared at her next target.

Part 7

As all the others were scattered here and there, Kamijou Touma crawled along some stone pavement with the last remains of his clothes clinging onto him for dear life.

“Oh, Kamijou Touma,” said a refined male voice. “What is this about you dying?”

“I am going to die. I really am going to die with all this going on!! Do you people begin battling without giving any thought to making it a balanced fight!? And who are you anyway!?”

“We are…”

“The royal we!?”

“We are the sea king, so that is to be expected. In fact, it would seem nonsensical to hear us say ‘I’ or ‘me’,” said the relatively harmless-looking man. “Let us get back on topic. We are Ægir, king of the Norse sea.”

He was a king, so it was to be expected.

It was possible he had halved Kamijou’s gold and dragged him out of the coffin.

“By the way, that woman is our queen, Rán. But unlike us, she is incredibly aggressive, so whenever the mischievous woman takes a liking to a human soul, she drags them down to become a resident of the palace.”

“Oh, so you’re one of the idiot couples you see in myths sometimes? The Greek mythology book I read in the school library the other day was awful! How do Zeus and Hera even stay at the top!?”

“How rude. Rán is trying to save everyone.”

“Hm?”

“You see….”

Ægir must have been very well-prepared because he pulled out a water tank and placed a cup inside.

“This world’s sea is like this cup. But if you attempt to return to your original worlds, the cup will break. What will happen then? The water in the rest of the tank will come rushing in. And do you know what will happen to the island inside the cup?”

“……Sounds like it would be in a lot of trouble.”

“It would in fact be in a lot of trouble.” Ægir nodded. “The world has two options: you can abandon our world and return to your own or you can give up on returning home in order to protect our world. Those are the only options.”

“Um, so is Rán-chan on such a rampage because she’s trying to kill us and protect the world?”

“How rude. As we already said, Rán is trying to save everyone.”

“Could you explain that more clearly?”

“Hm. The historical silencing is affecting her more strongly at the moment, so we should be able to speak more freely. …It seems to still be having some effect, though.”

Ægir thought for a bit.

“Very well. We will give you a direct answer that should get our meaning across even if our words are twisted.”

“Please do.”

“Rán is attempting to evolve herself by experiencing a battle that exceeds her limits. She wishes to become a ‘grim reaper of the sea’ who does not kill and has complete control over the sea that could cover the nine worlds. But if that happens, all traces of her current self will vanish and she will transform into an entirely different god in both body and mind.”

It was a ridiculous idea.

It sounded like making a human sacrifice.

It was true that would protect the lives of everyone in the nine worlds while also allowing Kamijou’s group to return to their homes.

But…

“What meaning is there in that?”

“There is none. She is thinking too highly of herself. We sea gods cannot influence major events, so her idea is doomed to fail from the very beginning. Even if it all succeeded and even if she transformed into something else, she would still be unable to protect anything.”

“That’s not what I meant!! Who would think they’d been saved if they were protected like that!?”

“…”

“I don’t know what exactly to do, but let’s go save her. Just tell me what I have to do!!”

“We are the sea king. We cannot influence history. Just as Rán will fail, we too will-…”

“Shut up!! That’s not what I’m talking about!!”

Kamijou cut him off and stared directly at the surprised god.

“Then why did you even speak to me!? Rán-chan’s your wife, isn’t she? You did something because you didn’t want to sit idly by and lose everything for a decent-sounding reason like saving the world and everyone in it, right!? Then stick with it to the end. You may fail, but the rest of us will make up for it!! What did you want to do from the very beginning!?”

“…ell…”

Ægir's voice briefly faded.

Something was obstructing his words. A cruel system was crushing the bud of possibility and telling him not to change history and to simply watch the tragedy unfold.

"Well…"

But he seemed to shake it off

His pride as sea king allowed him to temporarily overturn the rules of the world.

"She is our wife and that would be meaningless if we did not save her."

The two of them stretched their legs on the stone pavement and clearly stood up.

First, Kamijou and the others had to regroup.

After that, they would rush onto the intense battlefield the undersea palace had become.

"Let's try everything we can think of. Even if that doesn't turn up the answer, it should at least give us a hint. And if we gather enough hints, we should be able to come up with a completely different answer! So…!!"

"Yes, we will no longer give up before even trying. We are the sea king, so we will have our way in the sea even if nowhere else!!"

Part 8

The sea was beautiful, it brought blessings, and it was the mother of all life.

But at the same time, it was a frightening mouth of death.

Rán was the goddess destined to manage that mouth of death.

(This still is not enough.)

She held Skíðblaðnir in one arm of water and her own slender arms grabbed her soul-catching magic net while she quietly thought.

(This still is not enough to change my divinity!! I must fight more and more and more!!)

In that case, she needed to take responsibility for all deaths at sea, even if that was forced onto her from truly foreign worlds that were outside her jurisdiction.

She named herself a goddess, so she had to protect all lives from that unreasonable mouth of death.

“Rán! Don’t fight!! Waltraute and the others aren’t bad people!!”

The boy shouted at the verge of tears from nearby.

She glanced over toward him but said nothing.

She had already decided she would protect them all.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Hel, queen of the underworld, cried out.

She swung an arm horizontally and produced a giant sword of ice.

But it looked like toothpick compared to Skíðblaðnir. It crashed into the ship on the first swing and the sinister ice that smelled of death and the underworld was smashed to pieces.

Nevertheless, not a single shard fell to the ground.

Their points all turned toward the sea goddess and they shot toward her from countless directions like precision guided missiles.

Rán would soon be filled with holes, but she wrapped her soul-catching net around her own slender arm.

She swung the arm around and intercepted every last shard.

Not a drop of blood was shed.

(This net captures souls. When it binds a soul from without, no attack can destroy the soul within!!)

She counterattacked by throwing the net.

It bound Hel’s entire body and Rán grabbed the long thread that closed the net. She swung the woman around like a morning star and threw her into the distance.

Hel collided with Waltraute who had finally recovered and was attempting a surprise attack with her white horse.

The two lost their balance and Rán smashed them from above with Skíðblaðnir.

(My experience points will never leave the expected range if I only battle other Norse gods. To alter my divinity, it would be best to battle the heroes who have come from truly foreign worlds.)

New footsteps reached her ears.

"…"

(So they're finally here.)

With colossal ship supported by the arm of water and her own shoulder, Rán turned around.

These were strangers from truly foreign worlds.

They were the final piece Rán needed to gain an abnormal level of experience and remake her body and mind into something other than a sea goddess.

Kamijou Touma, Index, Misaka Mikoto, Quenser Barbotage, Heivia Winchell, Milinda Brantini (aboard the Baby Magnum), Jinnai Shinobu, Zashiki Warashi Yukari, the Yuki Onna, Anzai Kyousuke, Higashikawa Mamoru, the bunny girl, Nanajou Kyouichirou, and Satsuki all confronted her.

The difference in numbers meant nothing to Rán, the dreadful goddess who ruled the stormy seas.

And then, the swimsuit-wearing grimoire library spoke from the knowledge those 103,000 grimoires gave her.

"Exorcism 1. As a symbol of driving out uninvited guests to a temple, a dodecagram is displayed on a circle with a ship travelling the stars. That refers to the gathering of the twelve signs of the zodiac and the one who desires our return via the heavens!!"

(…?)

That was a series of rules Rán was unfamiliar with.

A moment later, Skíðblaðnir began emitting intense light.

The ship connected to the truly foreign was activating.

However, the sea goddess was unaware of this method.

They were opening a door to the truly foreign, but they were not using the sea.

"The sea is a symbol of the world's boundaries. It's the most obvious symbol of 'the ends of the earth', but that isn't the only such symbol in the Norse world." Index pointed

straight up. “There is also the sky. Even the gods of Asgard can only control the paths of the sun and moon, so a vast expanse must exist there that is not part of the nine worlds. If we pass through there, no seawater will enter this world even if it breaks a hole in the world. There is no need for you to change what you are!!”

Part 9

“Over here, sister.”

A carefree girl’s voice filled a territory even higher up than Asgard that was less the “sky” than it was “outer space”.

The small girl whipped a splendid horse and her cart was actually dragging around the entire moon.

Another girl driving an identical cart casually approached from the far side of the sky.

This other girl was dragging around the sun.

“Sigh. Another exhausting day.”

“If you stop, the wolves will come eat you.”

“Why are we dragging around heavenly bodies when we’re just humans? Although it’s pretty amazing that humans can pull this off if we put our minds to it.”

“Hey, hey. Things are getting noisy down below.”

“I wonder if something’s happening.”

The sisters of the sun and moon casually passed the baton and the curtain of night fell.

They were higher up than the peak of the world tree.

This was the last remaining virgin ground that the gods had yet to develop and that not even the rooster on the peak of Yggdrasil could reach.

Part 10

“Ah.”

Rán uttered a meaningless gasp.

Its lack of meaning may have been the only reason it was allowed to escape her mouth.

Meanwhile, the situation continued to progress.

Index's words were not enough to create a miracle, but all of the strangers were gathering. Laws and possibilities unknown to Rán were scattered around like stars in the sky.

So…

"I use the rose symbol to bind the world's name and set the ship's course! The name of light is…oh, honestly! Isn't there something!? It'd be perfect if we had something to take the place of a vortex of light even more powerful than the sun!!"

"You can leave that to the Princess! You'll never be short on power with a JPlevelMHD reactor working for you!!"

"A vermilion door is reflected in the mind. Place a single charm on the forehead, close your eyes, accurately picture it in your heart, and…another gap!! To bypass the flow of power, I need a system other than spells!!"

"Then do you think you can build it up as a Package? Hey, good-for-nothing Youkai, you have enough of a connection with Hyakki Yakou to know the formula for that, right? Hand over all the variables and this girl will arrange the rest!!"

"Construct symbols in the four cardinal directions and the south-southwest entrance will call in power!! The torrent of swirling power is…here!! I need to create an exit that can't be expressed with any of the cardinal directions!"

"I think only the Absurd can satisfy a contradictory request like that."

"We will release the yoke of the flesh and ascend through the mental door and into the heavens! This resembles a mock funeral, so…last one!! I want to create a state of apparent death, so I need a great symbol of death!!"

"Then how about the knowledge of the Killer Queen?"

A tremendous light broke Skíðblaðnir down into a tremendous torrent. The pillar of light stretched endlessly upwards and looked something like a giant tower or elevator up to heaven.

"…"

Rán simply stared at it.

As long as the sea's limits were not broken, the nine worlds' lives would not be lost.

As long as the sea was not used in their escape, there was no need to keep the strangers here like human sacrifices.

And there was also no need for Rán's own transformation.

This was a perfect result.

It was what she had initially dreamed of.

Yet as she faced it, she felt an ominous crawling of the muscles in her slender arms.

The hand holding her soul-catching net squirmed as if to ruin it all.

"Ah…"

At that point, she finally remembered her own nature.

The sea gods would not be affected by Ragnarök, but they instead lacked the ability to influence any turning point in history.

Her being and her actions had been doomed to fail from the beginning.

So the more she hoped for a happy future, the more her decisions would smash it all to pieces.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

She no longer had any control over her own actions as she swung around her soul-catching net. Like with a metal ball on a chain, she began building up centrifugal force in order to throw it.

As the others performed their bold yet delicate ceremony, she prepared to destroy it all.

However…

"It's okay, Rán," someone said.

First a pointy-haired boy and then several other people stood in her way.

But they were not there to fight.

They were there to protect her heart.

"Ægir told me everything. I know the restrictions binding you and what you really want to do, so it's okay. We won't let you destroy your dream!!"

"…"

As usual, Rán could not respond.

She simply twisted her beautiful features like a child on the verge of tears.

But that was more than enough.

Both sides rushed forward at full speed to begin their clash at the midpoint.

The final battle was beginning.

♦

It no longer mattered whether they had stopped World War Three, run around destroying nuke-resistant weapons, or gone around confronting cutting-edge crimes that used occult powers.

They charged forward only because they wanted to protect a goddess's dignity and pride.

Could they overcome the difference in strength?

The Object and the Youkai were one thing, but some of them were mere high school or college students in every aspect except the workings of their minds. Wouldn't they be torn to mincemeat?

None of that was a problem.

After all…

"The sea king commands you as the one who can calm any storm by striking the waves with an oar."

A voice not belonging to any of the strangers rang out.

It was the sea king.

While Rán ruled fearsome stormy seas, the other sea god ruled the calm seas that brought blessings to mankind.

"The stormy waves are forbidden to harm the children of men! The water must peacefully greet human smiles!!"

Ægir's words and his divinity calmed the stormy sea.

Ægir and Rán's power may have been evenly matched, but by stripping her of her weapon and power, she was weakened to the point that even a mere high school boy could oppose her.

The truly foreign protagonists rushed forward to do the seemingly impossible and save a goddess.

Behind them, Index spoke the final words.

"Return everything to its rightful place! We follow the aforementioned exorcism process to expel ourselves from this land and become the light in the heavens!!"

They had bought the time they needed.

Rán…no, whatever was behind Rán's movements had failed to interrupt Index's ceremony.

So Misaka Mikoto's body floated up into the air. Quenser, Heivia, the non-human Youkai, and even the two hundred thousand ton Object did the same.

All of the strangers gathered in the torrent of light.

No one could reach them anymore, so this truly was goodbye.

"Ha ha!! See!? Changing history feels great, doesn't it!?"

As Jinnai Shinobu floated toward the sky, he made a gun gesture toward Rán and shouted that comment her way.

Floating upside-down, Kamijou Touma gave a comment of his own.

"We have to leave now, but there's nothing we can do that you can't. You understand now that you saw this, right!? You don't need to give up on anything from now on!!"

"…"

Rán silently looked up at them.

No.

This time, she fought against the rules of the world with all her strength and moved her lips.

Thank you.

Immediately afterwards, the torrent of light took the strangers away and launched them beyond the heavens.

This time, they truly did leave the Norse world.

Part 11

Not to ruin the moment, but didn't Kamijou Touma have Imagine Breaker?

"H-huh? Now I'm worried… No, it'll be fine. This time, we built in the Object and the Package and whatever all that was!! So one little right hand isn't going to ruin it all, is it!? I really don't want to end up back there after showing off like that!"

But despite his shouting, he did not really know where he was.

He could vaguely tell he was moving at tremendous speed, but the wholly white scenery gave him nothing to compare to. Just as a fighter jet or space shuttle's speed was difficult to grasp at a distance, his senses could not keep up with it at all.

And he suddenly noticed that Index, Misaka Mikoto, and the others were gone.

He did not want to be left alone, but like the world of a Zen dialogue, this place made him realize he could only be giving a monologue if he was alone and therefore he had to be alone.

"Wait… Don't tell me I can't reach Academy City but I also can't get back to the Norse world. Please no!! Wasn't the one infinite hell enough suffering for one life!? And come to think of it, it was all connected to a Norse god last time too!!"

Just as he was about to begin crying, a girl's voice entered his head.

"I had a feeling this would happen."

"Birdway?"

"……"

"Yes, yes!! I get it!! It's Othinus, right!? You two sound a lot alike, so it's hard to tell without a visual!!"

"If you're doing that well, I suppose you'll be fine wandering in the void for a few years."

"Not happening! I'd have several different kinds of breakdowns!"

“Fine then,” said the voice in his head. “I’ve already lost my power as a Magic God, but as you mentioned, I still have the Norse symbolism. I’ll set my existence itself as the address and drag your body out.”

“Um… What about my right hand?”

“What? I don’t care about a hand that can be crushed by a Magic God-class attack. I can force it through with brute strength. That’s why they call us gods, you know?”

A moment later, Kamijou Touma’s path was corrected as casually as someone grabbing his shoulder from behind.

And…

Part 12

“Ah!?”

Kamijou Touma woke up.

He was curled up in the bathtub of his student dorm’s bathroom.

“H-huh? Was that a dream?”

It seemed far too vivid for that, but he got up regardless.

And then he realized two things.

First, the toilet had been shut off at the source, so the water had stopped. And second…

“What is this? Why am I wearing a swimsuit?”

He felt an unpleasant sensation run along his spine, but staying here would answer nothing. Instead, he tilted his head and opened the bathroom door.

There, he found fifteen centimeter Othinus and the silver-haired nun waiting for him.

However, the description “who wore a teacup-like white habit with golden embroidery” no longer applied.

After all…

“Index-san, why are you wearing a swimsuit?”

“Come to think of it, we never did do anything about my Walking Church being burnt. Touma? What am I going to wear now?”

♦

Jinnai Shinobu was chased around a thatch-roofed house by some Youkai and a demon.

“Ahhh!! Why is everyone wearing swimsuits!? This feels like when everyone decides to go for a picnic without telling me! But leave the swimsuits to me. A succubus in a micro-bikini is clearly superior to a Zashiki Warashi in a normal bikini or a Yuki Onna in a school swimsuit!!”

“You brought me a souvenir, didn’t you? I smell the ocean, so I’m at least hoping for some fish.”

“One of you is a global demon and the other is a deadly Nekomata. Even if you’re joking, you could easily kill me if you slip up and use too much strength! Of course I’m going to be afraid!!”

♦

Anzai Kyousuke and Higashikawa Mamoru woke up on a university lecture room bench.

The two of them were wearing swimsuits out of season and it felt like the professor had mistaken it for them taking club activities too far and was about to have them leave the classroom.

The bunny girl was not there, which was not surprising given what had happened in the past, but…

“It’s kind of hard to accept that she really isn’t here.”

“Hey, stop that. Even speaking of that kind of possibility can call in the Absurd.”

“Yeah, but it really wouldn’t surprise me to find out she’d made a secret comeback somewhere.”

“And I’m telling you that mentioning that is going to make this a preview of things to come!!”

♦

It was said a swimsuit-wearing killer wandered the filthy back alleys night after night.

“Kyouichirou, it looks like my identity is being distorted.”

“Don’t worry. You were weird enough alrea- bgh!?”

“Sorry, it’s hard holding back quite enough.”

♦

And in the very, very end, Quenser and Heivia were left holding their heads in their hands.

The two idiots were left with the tragedy of wearing swimsuits while their girl sat in the center of a giant hunk of steel.

“Come to think of it, our Princess escaped entirely unscathed! We didn’t even get a swimsuit bonus!! There’s not even a ‘Kyah! Pervert!’ once we get back to our world and she comes to her senses!! What is going on!?”

“Stop it. If you ask for that, I can only picture an image of the Baby Magnum wearing a gigantic bikini or school swimsuit.”

“Surely the world isn’t *that* unfair. I think we should be more honest with our desires!!”

“If you get even less of a filter, the world’s rules are going to start crumbling.”

♦

They each walked down their separate paths.

They all faced different directions, but if it ever became necessary, they would surely cross paths once more.

They would overturn every rule of reality to save whoever stood before them.

AFTERWORD

It's been a while. This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This here is the Kamachi Kazuma 10th Anniversary Special Project!! I was asked to write a book that threw in as many of the series I've written as possible. It's also meant as an advertisement for all of the books I've spent ten years writing, so if you're interested, make sure you head out and pick up all those books!!

Anyway, I knew I had to gather together the characters from several different series, but instead of creating an original universal timeline just for this, I asked myself if one of the already existing series would fit the bill. I ultimately chose the Norse world of The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage. It was an untapped goldmine of convenient ideas I could use, so it's useful when I'm having trouble.

I wrote The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage with the personal goal of writing short stories for Dengeki Bunko Magazine that focused on comedy instead of battles, but to be honest, I also wanted to familiarize the readers with Norse mythology because Index was about to reach that territory at the time (with the anti-Othinus stuff). I of course succeeded if you simply picked up the book, but I also think I succeeded if word got out that I was writing a story focused on Norse mythology.

Instead of the new characters, I think the main point in this novel was the chemical reactions seen when characters from different series were allowed to interact, but I also didn't feel like writing a simple love comedy story with no real context. Since I was using The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage as the baseline, I decided to add in trivia about Norse mythology and the destruction of the world to show off the chemical reactions between the characters.

Hel is a wonderfully mysterious topic and one of my favorite people(?) alongside the Valkyries. That may be why about two "Hel-chans" have already appeared in Index.

Also, when you line up all these characters, you can tell that, for some reason, I find girls wearing a long, white, dress-like outfit to have a powerful mystique. A character like that already stands at the center of a few different series. …I'm not going to dig too deeply into my psychology here, so let's back up some. But first, one more point. Heavy Object's Princess has short hair, wears a military uniform, and has medium-sized breasts (i.e. not huge but not flat either). In other words, I intentionally took her in the opposite

direction of my usual tendencies. …Her most notable feature is the special suit, but that was actually Nagi Ryo-san's idea and she wore something like a fighter jet's anti-G suit in the original draft. If you look at all this, you might be able to tell how I was trying to throw in everything Index did not have in order to create a second series to follow it.

I give my thanks to all the illustrators and to my editors, Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. I don't think I would have been able to create such a self-indulgent celebration if I simply wrote the manuscript myself. I am truly thankful that they have helped keep me going for ten years, that they gave me free rein in the name of a celebrating the tenth anniversary, and that they gave me this project.

And I also give my thanks to the readers. It is undoubtedly because all of you enjoyed it so much that I was able to produce so many different worlds and characters. I am hoping they will continue to live on in your hearts in the future, too.

And I will end this here.

Now, what to do for the twentieth anniversary?

-Kamachi Kazuma